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THE BLAFT ANTHOLOGY OF
TAMIL PULP FICTION

VOLUME 2

THE BLAFT ANTHOLOGY OF TAMIL PULP FICTION

VOLUME 2

selected and translated by

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INDRA SOUNDAR RAJAN

Indra Soundar Rajan draws his inspiration from the panoply of local deities of Tamil Nadu, the strange legends that surround them, and the complex histories of the various kingdoms that have existed here. He has woven stories around these themes to produce not only hundreds of novels, but also a large body of writing for television, including the wildly popular serial *Marma Desam* ("Land of Mystery") and the newly launched *Yamirukka Bayamein* ("Why Fear When I Am Here").

The Palace of Kottaipuram, one of his all-time bestselling novels, was originally serialized in weekly installments in *Anantha Vikatan*, with suspenseful endings to make sure the reader picked up the next issue. The chapter breaks here reflect the original divisions.

THE PALACE OF KOTTAIPURAM

கோட்டைப்புரத்து வீடு (1990)

1

THE PLANE SWOOPED DOWN like a huge metal bird. What a sight! It landed on the runway, turned its sharp beak, sped down the tarmac, and came to a smooth halt about fifty metres from the control tower of the tiny Madurai Airport.

Of the passengers coming down the stepladder, one stood out: Viswanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan, known to his friends as Visu.

The regal characteristics of the whole Kottaipuram clan were evident in his clothes, his colour, the way he carried himself. Watching him stride through the foyer holding his gray briefcase, Karwar Karunakaran, his clerk, brimmed with pride. He welcomed Visu warmly as he stepped out of the airport.

"*Namaskaram*, oh Raja!"

In return, Visu merely nodded distractedly, as his eyes scanned the parking lot, searching for someone. Disappointed, he turned back to the karwar.

"Are you looking for someone, Raja?"

"Karunakaran, my name is Visu," he snapped, irritated. "You're more than twice my age! Why do you insist on using these pompous titles? Please call me by my name."

"But that would be disrespectful, sir! The grandeur of Kottaipuram lies in the way your family has retained the esteem of its subjects. Whatever you may say, you are a member of the royalty, and I am a mere karwar, a clerk, forever loyal to you. Why, when even Thirumeni Devar, the eldest man in the *samasthanam*, calls you 'Raja,' how can *I* afford to be presumptuous?" Karunakaran guided him towards the parking lot. Mallaya, the driver, gave a low bow and took Visu's briefcase.

In the parking lot, amidst several Marutis and Ambassadors, was a Vauxhall bearing the bright yellow flag of the princely state of Kottaipuram. Even as the driver held the rear door open, Visu climbed into the driver's seat.

"Please, Raja," Karunakaran begged him. "If your grandmother the maharani comes to know that I let you drive, I'll lose my job. I can already hear her shouting at me. 'How many times do I have to tell you?' she'll yell. 'Don't you have any brains?'"

"Karunakaran," Visu cut in sternly, "as long as you are in this car with me, I don't want to hear another word from you. In fact, if you do say another word, I'll speak to my mother and make *sure* you lose your job. Also, try to learn to call me Visu. If you really can't manage that, at least call me *Thambi*."

He sounded genuinely angry, and Karunakaran and Mallaya got into the back seat without another peep. Visu started the car.

Just as he turned onto the main road, a moped, as if it had been waiting for the car, sped right up to them, touched the bumper, and came to a halt.

On the moped, clad in tight jeans and a T-shirt, her hair in a ponytail and a slim gold chain with a locket around her neck, sat a young girl, about twenty—her figure like a sandalwood statue.

Visu cut the engine at once and called out excitedly, "Hi Archana!"

"Sorry I'm late, Visu," said Archana, getting off the moped. "I had some trouble with my vehicle."

Visu was already out of the car. "I was hoping to see you the second I got off the plane."

She replied with a gleeful giggle. Her lightly polished lips and the neat row of shining pearly whites behind them captivated Visu's attention. Her elegant looks reflected a high-class upbringing.

In the car, Karunakaran was looking concerned. Mallaya had already broken into a sweat. "What's happening, sir? There seems to be something going on between him and this girl..." the driver whispered softly to the karwar. The karwar silently pushed him aside, and they went back to listening in on the exchange.

Archana's bout of laughter ended with a jiggle of her firm breasts. "So how was the Bangalore trip? Was it a success?" she asked, throwing her arm around Visu's shoulder in a manner that confirmed the karwar's and the driver's suspicions.

Visu gave an elaborate nod to indicate that it had, indeed, been a success.

This is a deep love; they're as close as copulating serpents, thought the karwar. His initial shock that Visu had somehow managed to get involved with a girl—in spite of the tight watch they kept over him—now gave way to panic.

Visu had completed his engineering degree just a month ago. His exam results were yet to be announced. He had already started a small industrial tool manufacturing business in Madurai, and had made the trip to Bangalore to purchase machinery.

The Samasthanam of Kottaipuram was a princely state situated forty miles south of Madurai. Visu was the younger son of the late Ramanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan, the sixth raja of Kottaipuram. Gajendran Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan, the elder son and seventh raja, took care of the estate.

The two sons had little in common. The elder brother had never stepped outside the boundaries of Kottaipuram, and remained tied to his traditional roots, while Visu, the younger brother, loved to travel and had a scientific, rational outlook.

"Visu, I have happy news for you," chirped Archana.

"What?"

"My father is coming to your samasthanam. He wants to tell your mother and grandmother about our relationship. Finally, after four years, no more secrets!" Not noticing as Visu's face turned pale, she went on, "Why aren't you saying anything? You asked me to come to the airport because you had something important to discuss. What is it, Visu?"

Visu gave her a dark look. His throat was rapidly drying up.

"What is it?" Archana asked again, gently nudging him.

"Archana..." Visu began hesitantly. "How much do you love me?"

"Right up to the sky," was the prompt reply.

"Suppose you came to know that not long after our marriage, I would die... Would you still...?"

She did not wait for Visu to finish. She reacted as though he had just jabbed sharp needles into her ears. "What are you talking about?" she demanded, choked with tears.

"I'm sorry, Archana. I had to know how deep your love is. I had to ask you this," consoled Visu. Archana lifted her teary face up to him.

"I don't care if we never get married, Visu. You'll always be my husband anyway. Don't you know that?"

"Thank you, Arch..." he said, kissing both her hands.

Archana looked at the sky. "Visu, it's getting late. You haven't yet told me what you wanted to discuss," she reminded him.

"Tomorrow," replied Visu.

Archana realized that nagging him would be useless. "Fine!" she said, and halfheartedly kickstarted her moped. The Vauxhall followed her down the main road.

They drove in the same direction for some distance, Archana often turning back to wave at Visu. At a fork, she took the road going into the city, and Visu turned onto the one leading to Aruppukkottai.

In the back seat, both the karwar and the driver sat quiet and tense. After some time, the karwar said to Visu, "Thambi, please don't mistake me, but do you think what you are doing is right?"

"What?"

"Being in love with that girl..."

"Who said that being in love is a crime? Archana's not just some girl I picked up off the street, Karwar. She's the daughter of a *crorepathi*."

"Maybe so, Thambi! Indeed, she looks like a freshly bloomed flower. And shouldn't she be blessed with flowers all her life, to wear in her hair as a happily married woman, with a *thali* around her neck and a *pottu* mark on her forehead?"

Visu brought the car to a sudden halt and turned around in his seat.

"Karwar... Do you really believe, like everyone else in the samasthanam seems to believe, that I will die when I turn thirty?"

"My beliefs are well founded on past events, aren't they? Has any man in your family survived past his thirtieth birthday?"

At this, Visu fell fearfully quiet.

The karwar cut into the silence. "I'm not saying this because I oppose your love—only because I want the best for you, and for that girl."

Hearing the concern in the karwar's words, Visu looked up at him.

"Karwar, can this curse actually be real?" he asked in a hushed tone. "I can't fully comprehend it. We're living in a modern age when a determined man can achieve anything he wishes for. This isn't Dvapara Yuga or Tretha Yuga anymore, when magical curses had power!"

He put the car into gear again, as the karwar stared at him unwaveringly.

"Whatever age we live in, Thambi, there are always things beyond a man's capacity for understanding. The day when people stop believing in curses and the repercussions of their sins, this whole world will become a cremation ground. Of course, it's unfortunate that *you* will have to pay the price for the sins committed by your forefathers..."

"You know, no one has ever even told me what this curse is all about."

"You will come to know when the time is right. It's bad enough that no male member of your family makes it past thirty. What's even worse

is that your family will never have a girl child. And there is something else I must tell you, Thambi…"

"What, Karwar?"

"If God wills it, this curse could be lifted today. Then you would be free to marry Archana without any misgivings!"

"Is that right? And how might that be done, Karwar?"

"Today your elder brother, Gajendran Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan, the ruling prince of the samasthanam, turns thirty. Thirumeni Devar has been responsible for watching over him closely ever since he turned twenty-nine—you're aware of that. Your elder brother owes Devar his life. If only he can make it through today! Then all the pujas that have been performed, all the alms that have been given this year will have served their purpose. Right now, your mother and your sister-in-law, Valaiyambikai, are in the temple of your family deity, Vengai Ponni Amman. They made the unanimous decision to spend these last few tense hours in the presence of the idol. Vengai Ponni Amman is a very powerful goddess. Perhaps the curse will lose its potency in Her presence…"

Engrossed in Karunakaran's words, Visu drove on autopilot, the nerves in his forehead taut. The tamarind trees along the roadside gave way to lush green fields on either side. Goats and cows grazed on the few drier patches.

"The maharani sent me to the airport to bring you straight to the Vengai Ponni Amman temple," said the karwar. "Otherwise, Mallaya would have come alone."

Visu looked at Karunakaran thoughtfully. It was already half past five. As if acknowledging the hour, the sun was setting in the west.

The ancient temple *gopuram* rose out of the dense forest. Birds flew in and out of its every crevice. The old bronze *kalasam* at the top of the gopuram reflected the magic light of the setting sun, looking like something from an alchemist's dream. Nearby, under the thick beech trees, were the hutments of the samasthanam's tribal population, the Noorukudi. Their clothes spoke of their hard toil in the fields. For centuries, they had worked on the thousands of acres around the temple, planting seeds,

rearing the saplings into giant trees, and converting the whole area into a semi-woodland, while living in their tiny thatched huts and watching over the idol of the goddess Amman. Their loyalty to the history and traditions of the princely state was etched in deep lines on their faces.

In front of the small *garbagraham*—the sanctum sanctorum of the temple—was the hundred-pillared *mandap*, in the centre of which was the *durbar*. There were three women seated there on the silk carpet. First was Pandiammal, the maharani, grandmother of Visu and Gajendran. Next was Divyamangalam, Pandiammal's daughter-in-law and the rajas' mother. Last was Valaiyambikai, Gajendran's consort, who was full-term pregnant. Though all three were decked in nearly enough jewellery to fracture their dainty necks, they were also steeped in sorrow.

Opposite them was Raja Gajendran, seated on a chair, dressed in a silk *veshti*, a shirt, and a gold chain, his chest soaked in sweat, the fear of impending death lurking behind his eyes. At his side stood the doctor, Sampathkumar, ready to protect Gajendran from any ailment—but would he be able to protect him from fate?

On the other side of the raja stood Pandikutti, one of the Noorukudi. The sinews of his shoulders and chest shone as if he had molded them from iron. Even his little finger was strong enough to lift a brick, hot from the kiln, and hurl it into the air.

"Thirumeni... My son Gajendran must never be taken from me!" The words had been spoken exactly a year ago, on Gajendran's twenty-ninth birthday, by his mother Divyamangalam to Thirumeni Devar, the old guru of the samasthanam. *"He must be saved at any cost! My lineage must survive for many centuries, and flourish. We have to challenge the curse. I have faith in Vengai Ponni Amman, whom I worship every day. You are the only one with whom I can entrust this responsibility. You will do this for me, won't you?"*

And that was why the ancient Devar had planted both the doctor and Pandikutti right beside the raja. They watched over Gajendran constantly, alert as whip snakes, not allowing him out of their sight. If he had to leave the palace for any reason, they went along with him.

Television, video, every form of entertainment was provided to him in his room; he even had a food-taster. He lived the cloistered life of a royal prisoner. He hated it—but tolerated it, for he wanted to live!

The line of his ancestors who had not made it past the age of thirty flashed before his eyes.

One slipped on the staircase and cracked his skull. Another fell from a horse which ran amok. Yet another hanged himself for no apparent reason. One was killed when a heavy tree branch inexplicably broke from a tree and fell on his head. The next suffered a sudden heart attack. Not one of them made it through the whole three hundred and sixty-five days of their twenty-ninth year! Here I am… I have lasted this long. I have just a few more hours to go. Will I be the first in the family to beat the curse?

At the exact moment that these thoughts were racing through Gajendran's mind, a cobra was crawling stealthily into the stone drain that led to the garbagraham…

2

The serpent was almost seven feet long. It slunk into a dark corner of the garbagraham, raised its head a foot above the ground, and spread its hood. The two tall *kuthuvillaku* lamps at Vengai Ponni Amman's foot were lit, their ten points shining.

The goddess was dressed in splendour, seated majestically on an open-mouthed stone tiger.

In front of the idol were silver plates with betel leaves, areca nuts, flowers, fruits, silk skirts, and garlands of ylang-ylang flowers. The snake eyed all this, unblinking, and then coiled up in its corner. Ponnambalam, the priest, stood outside the garbagraham, dressed in a green silk turban and a red silk veshti, as per the tradition of the samasthanam, ready to conduct the puja.

Next to the priest was Thirumeni Devar, the state elder. Though nearly a hundred years old, he looked no more than seventy. Only the slack, fleshy jowls, like those of a turkey, signaled his true age. His red eyes; his sharp, hooked nose; the large round *kumkum* pottu on his forehead, and the black dot below it; his bare chest; his red veshti, worn in a

strange style—all this announced him as the royal guru. His spellbinding presence compelled one to bow in deep respect, but on a closer look, one might also be terrified. He was rubbing his bald pate in consternation. Until last year, he had been able to walk briskly. Only recently had he acquired a black walking stick with an ivory handle and a silver rim. It had been Maharani Pandiammal's gift to him. Now he swung the walking stick gently in front of him as he stood in deep thought.

Pandiammal approached him. The people around them moved back in deference.

"Devar, what are you thinking about?" she asked softly.

Devar snapped his head up. His gaze was fiery with anger. Pandiammal understood. She gathered her rustling silk sari around her, smoothed back her gray hair, and said, "You are our senior. It does not bode well for us if you are angry. This samasthanam is yours. Tell me, please, if we have done anything wrong."

"Yes," said Devar, through his dry lips. "Where is the younger raja?"

"Visu?"

"Mm-hm."

"He had gone to Bangalore. I sent the karwar to the airport. They must be on their way."

"Who gave him permission to go away at a time like this? Is a trip to Bangalore more important than this puja?"

"He had no idea that you would arrange this puja. Even we were informed only today! Had I known earlier, of course I would not have let him leave. But why are you so troubled? He will be here soon, Devar."

Somewhat mollified, he wiped the sweat from his chest with a towel. "Maharani, I was born in this samasthanam, and I have lived here for nearly a century. I have watched four generations of royals go past me, and witnessed many events, both fortunate and unfortunate. I have tried to remain strong. But today… The grave responsibilities of keeping Raja Gajendran Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan alive, and finding a way to lift the curse, have taken their toll on me.

"The great Mother Vengai Ponni is my only comfort. It is She who has protected Gajendran for so long. She will protect him in the future,

too. This is a crucial time. The younger raja should be here with us! That is the reason I am troubled. Please do not take me wrong. Let us wait for him to begin the worship. If we can get past this midnight, then the elder raja has nothing more to fear," he said.

He walked, stumbling slightly, through the rows of pillars, leaning on his walking stick, until he reached the huge bronze bell. He looked up. His eyes pooled, and tears rolled down his cheeks.

"What? Is Devar *Aiya* crying?" wondered the gathered crowd, clutching their chins. "It is never a good sign when elders shed tears!"

Devar's disciple, Thillainayagam, until now a part of the crowd, rushed forward. Gajendran, on his chair, looked at him, frightened.

He beckoned his accountant Venugopal and asked, "Why is Devar crying?"

"I don't know, Thambi," replied the accountant.

It was Devar who spoke next. "Maharani, do you remember this bell rope? This is the very rope by which Vanjiammal hung herself, so long ago. Tomorrow is the Maasi Magam festival, at which we will honour our Vengai Ponni Amman. Pilgrims on their way back from the Murugan temple in Thiruchendur always stop here to get their blessings from our Amman. They bring the seawater from Thiruchendur to bathe her. It was these pilgrims who found Vanjiammal's corpse. The many early deaths in this family are due to her curse—the curse of a young mother, her child but a month old. A potent curse indeed! When I think back on the rajas of this samasthanam who chased her around this garbagraham and violated her chastity, my guts churn. Come, Maharani; prostrate yourself at this spot. Beg forgiveness from Vanjiammal. Beg her to stop punishing us for a crime committed long before our time. Where is your daughter-in-law? Call her. Everything depends on her atonement."

The three women—Pandiammal, Divyamangalam, and Valaiyambikai—had all heard Devar tell the story of that cursed day many times over. Still, his speech shook them. They rose to their feet. Valaiyambikai, in her full-term pregnancy, could not keep the tears from rolling down her cheeks. She was the first to fall at Devar's feet.

"Prostrate yourself before the bell rope," he commanded, moving aside.

She did, and the other two women followed suit.

From the gathered crowd, a fierce pair of eyes glared at them.

"Go ahead, fall and weep!" a voice muttered damningly. "You can fall and weep a thousand times. Still you won't be rinsed of your sins, you heirs of the rajas—those arrogant rajas who swore that the women of their samasthanam would never bow before Vengai Ponni Amman! Now, fall and weep!"

Tears soaking his cheek, the man who had spoken moved out of the crowd and sat under a tree.

"Irusan, why are you crying?" The voice was soft and close. Turning around, Irusan saw the palace sentry, Marudu, kneeling next to him.

"These upper-caste folks do whatever they please, Marudu. They do all sorts of ritual theatrics to cleanse their guilt, and then they just continue on as before," said Irusan, boiling with anger. "I can't bear it anymore. When I think of my son, who they hanged at the palace entrance...I can't help but cry."

Marudu felt as though Irusan's words were searing the centre of his forehead. "Don't worry," he said. "There is a God who is making them pay. They have so much, yet have no life beyond thirty to enjoy it all. Can there be a worse punishment than that?"

The next second, they were bathed in bright light. Startled, they looked up to see Visu driving up in the Vauxhall.

Visu switched off the headlights and got out. The gathered crowd lowered their heads in respect. Some even expressed their subservience by bowing down.

He indifferently touched his cheeks at the sight of Vengai Ponni Amman lit by the lamps.

"Hello! Was your flight delayed?" asked Divyamangalam, as she came forward. He nodded, noticing that Devar was giving him a reproving look.

"*Dey*, Devar is angry. Go fall at his feet," Pandiammal instructed her grandson.

"Why should I, Paatti?"

It was not the first time Visu had questioned the traditions of the samasthanam. Pandiammal had always assumed it was a college boy's attitude that he would eventually grow out of.

"Dey! In our samasthanam, Devar is like a god. Stop flaunting this childish arrogance. Go fall at his feet. He is the only one who can save you and your elder brother; it is he who has kept your brother alive this long. Go!"

Visu turned to look at Gajendran. There he sat, like a crumpled piece of paper, unable to shake his fear of death. He threw Visu a forced smile.

"*Anna,* stop worrying," Visu told him. "We're living in modern times. Curses and sins have no role anymore. Your life depends only on you."

Sampathkumar, the doctor, grinned at Visu. "I've been trying to convince him of that, Raja."

The sudden roar of a drum took over: *Dhoom! Dhoom! Dhoom!* More drums joined in. Ponnambalam, the priest, looked up at Vengai Ponni Amman, trembling with devotion. Thirumeni Devar stood at the entrance of the garbagraham holding his walking stick. Visu had slighted him by refusing to fall at his feet, and it showed in his eyes. He felt fear in his heart that he might be losing his stature in the samasthanam. His thoughts were broken when Ponnambalam started a roll on an *udukkai* drum.

The crowd understood that the puja was beginning. All eyes focused at the temple entrance. Divyamangalam steered Visu and Gajendran to Devar's side. Several aristocratic, turbaned men crowded around him as well. Ponnambalam stopped his drumming, picked up the silver plate with the ylang-ylang garland, and brought it to Devar, who touched it with his fingertips and then touched his fingertips to his eyes.

Thillainayagam, Devar's bodyguard, also touched the garland and then his eyes. The plate was passed around, and finally reached Gajendran.

"Raja," said Ponnambalam, "take the garland in. Go around the Amman and garland Her. Then you will have your ritual turban placed on your head, and the puja will begin."

Gajendran picked up the garland, brought it to his eyes, and entered the semi-lit garbagraham. It was pitch dark behind the idol. There was just enough space for one person to walk. As he moved behind the idol, he trod on the smooth snake. It sprang up, its hood raised. Realizing that he had stepped on something, Gajendran moved his foot. Triggered by an instinct for self-defense, the snake bit down on his foot. Unable to bear the pain, Gajendran dropped the garland and turned to rush out, but slipped and fell at Vengai Ponni Amman's foot. The idol wobbled on its base.

Seeing the idol shake, Visu rushed in from outside with Ponnambalam. Picking up one of the kuthuvillaku lamps and carrying it behind the idol, they saw Gajendran sprawled on the ground, the hooded serpent coiled on his chest.

3

Visu snatched Devar's walking stick and flung it at the snake, but the snake merely wound itself around the handle. As the crowd outside stood frozen with fear, Pandikutti, Gajendran's Noorukudi bodyguard, tried to pry the snake away.

"*Aiyyo*, has my son been bitten?" cried Divyamangalam. Valaiyambikai had already fainted flat on the ground. "Vengai Ponni Amman, have you no mercy at all? We came here to fall at your feet to beg you to rid us of this curse, but you have chosen to dash all our hopes!"

Visu felt a shiver run up his body. Pandikutti held the snake by its head. It twisted itself around his arm, still raging. He brought it out of the garbagraham. The crowd, including Devar, took a step back. Visu lifted Gajendran over his shoulder and brought him out. His body was already starting to turn blue.

"Doctor!" screamed Divyamangalam.

The doctor felt for Gajendran's pulse. "We must rush back to the palace," he said. "I have my medical kit there."

"You didn't bring it with you?" demanded Divyamangalam.

"I didn't see the need for it in a temple," mumbled the doctor.

"This is no time for chitchat," Visu snapped. He gently laid his brother down, ran to the Vauxhall, quickly drove it over, and swung it to a halt in a cloud of dust. Gajendran was lifted into the back seat.

Someone in the gathered crowd called out, "Aiya, the snake has bitten Pandikutti too! He has fainted. Can we put him in the car, too, please?"

Visu did not seem to hear the cry. He started the car as the doctor jumped into the front seat.

The car sped down the road, throwing dust in all directions. Despite the cool breeze blowing from the green fields around them, there was a stream of sweat running down Visu's cheek.

There was a sudden shudder from the back seat and the doctor turned round to look at Gajendran.

"Doctor, you're a fool. Whose bright idea was it to appoint you as my brother's protector?" Visu's tone was tight with anger. The car was doing eighty kilometers an hour.

"Thambi, I could not help it. I did want to bring my bag. It was Thillainayagam who stopped me. 'It is not your medical kit that will protect Gajendran; it is the Amman. He has nothing to fear in Her presence,' he told me."

"Thillainayagam? Who's that? Devar's man?"

"Yes!"

"That idiot! Who gave him authority over you? This palace is going to the dogs! Anyone with a stick in his hand thinks he's a cop. This is all my grandmother's fault."

"Don't judge Thillainayagam too harshly. He was just speaking from faith."

"Who cares? Did we expect this happen to my brother today?"

"It's the curse, Thambi. No one can beat fate!"

Visu brought the car to a sudden halt and turned to glance at his brother. "Doctor," he demanded, "don't tell me you believe in that nonsense too!"

"I'm sorry, but what happened just now has convinced me," replied the doctor, in a tense voice. He turned to look at Gajendran. Exactly at that moment, Gajendran's body convulsed and then went still.

Sampathkumar reached over to check his pulse, then looked up at Visu in sorrow.

"Thambi, the elder raja has left us."

Visu fell on the steering wheel. The blast of the horn was like the scream of his heart, echoing through all three hundred and sixty degrees.

Gajendran Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan's blue body was laid out on a silk bed in the palace durbar.

Divyamangalam and Pandiammal sat at his side, wilted with deep sadness. Visu stood next to a shining pillar, watching. Another old woman, dressed in common clothes, was consoling the sobbing Valaiyambikai. There was a great turmoil inside the young widow, a volcano that threatened to erupt at any moment.

"Chithi!" Valaiyambikai sobbed into the other woman's chest. "How many times did I beg you? I never wanted this palace, this life of luxury! Anyone can have wealth, lose it without warning, and then earn it back again. But a woman's thali…once lost, how can she get another? That's not so easy. I took the curse too lightly. Now I am the one who is ruined, Chithi… I am the one who is ruined!"

Visu heard Valaiyambikai's plaintive cry. He stood as still as a statue. For a second, he imagined Archana, his love, in Valaiyambikai's place.

Karwar Karunakaran's fatalistic words rang in his ears. *She looks like a freshly bloomed flower. Indeed, shouldn't she be blessed with flowers all her life, to wear in her hair as a happily married woman, with a thali around her neck and a pottu mark on her forehead?*

Valaiyambikai's aunt hugged her. "Devar Aiya is like a god to us. He promised me he would beat fate and ensure the elder raja a long full life, and I trusted him. I never expected this tragedy. When you married outside our community, I imagined you living the life of a queen! I only wanted the best for you! Not even our community leader Veera Nadar could have imagined this fate for you. Oh, what shall I do?" she lamented aloud.

The durbar was filled with important people, government officials, and other feudal lords, all steeped in sadness. The district collector had

come, along with his aide, the *davali*, who wore a turban on his head and a red shoulderbelt across his chest.

There were members of the press there as well, and their presence seemed to be bothering Thillainayagam. He ran up to Devar and whispered in his ear. Devar snapped his head up like a snake whose tail had been stamped on. He asked that the reporters be brought to him.

"This is Devar Aiya," said Thillainayagam, introducing them. "He is the *rajaguru* of this samasthanam. He is the philosopher, the guide, the everything to the royal family."

"We know that," replied one reporter.

Devar regarded him with surprise. "How would you know me? I've always steered clear of publicity..."

One of the reporters gave him a cocky grin. "We know all about the private lives of the president, the prime minister, and the chief ministers in this country. The affairs of this samasthanam are hardly more sacred than theirs."

The reporter's arrogance irritated Thillainayagam. "Look, mister, those are people with public lives. Of course you reporters pry into their personal matters. But this samasthanam has always managed to keep out the media. We are bound by traditions and codes of honour that you will never understand—"

"Excuse me, sir, but these days, investigative journalism rules," came the bold reply. "You can try to keep pushing your skeletons into the closet, but the truth will out. We have learned that every male heir of this samasthanam, without exception, has died before he turned thirty, and that all girl children die soon after birth. In this scientific age when men travel to the moon, such supernatural stories are of definite interest to us. With your cooperation, we would like to do a thorough investigation and run a detailed article."

Thillainayagam could not hold back a sharp bark of laughter. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. You might think it rude of me to laugh at this moment of tragedy. It was a laugh of frustration. We are in no position to help or cooperate with you. The royal family does not like their private matters discussed in public. The next in line, Viswanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan, is now only twenty-four. If news about these strange

deaths leaks out, no family will be willing to give their daughter as his wife. His life could be ruined."

"Excuse me..." cut in another reporter.

"Yes?" Thillainayagam turned to him.

"Why is it that only you are answering our questions? Can't Devar Aiya reply himself? Who are you, exactly, and what is your position in the samasthanam?"

Realizing that the question was meant to embarrass him, Thillainayagam tried to cover it up with an effusive smile. "I am Devar Aiya's personal assistant. I am also the rent collector for the samasthanam estate, and I take care of the taxes. I've known this family for over six decades."

Devar pulled Thillainayagam back, and stepped up himself. "I am willing to answer your questions. What do you want to know?" he asked.

"What is the real reason behind all these early deaths, and the fact that no girl child has ever survived?"

"It was a mother's curse."

"A curse?" smirked one of the reporters.

"You're not the first to mock this belief. Nevertheless, it is the truth," Devar insisted, his voice firm.

"And what is the story behind this curse?"

"Do you really think this is an appropriate time to ask me that, Thambi?" Devar asked quietly.

"Just give us the gist of it. We need to fill space tomorrow."

"There is a detailed account in a bamboo box kept in the palace puja room. But only a girl child born to the royal family will be allowed to read those palm leaves. The secret of breaking the curse, and preventing all these unnecessary deaths, is written there."

"What happens if someone else tries to open the box?"

"They will die that very day."

"Now you've *got* to be pulling my leg!"

Devar fixed the insolent reporter with a stern glare. "Four people have already tried and lost their lives. You are welcome to try and open

the box, if you dare, and tell us the secret. That would be a great favour to us."

The man opened his mouth, and then shut it again. "C-can I at least have a photograph of the box?" he stammered.

4

"You cannot just casually walk in and take a look at the box!" Devar declared. "You must wait for an auspicious hour. You think you can just barge in and photograph it? For us, that box is like an idol inside a garbagraham!"

"You claim that only a girl heir can open the box, but also that no girl child will survive. How do you solve that paradox, then?" The reporters wouldn't seem to let go.

"We, too, are puzzled. Now, can you please leave us alone?" snarled Devar, unable to contain his irritation any longer.

"Just one more question…"

"What is it?"

"He's next in line to the title, isn't he?" asked another reporter, pointing to Visu.

"Yes."

"Will he die at thirty, too?"

Devar wordlessly and unhappily nodded his head. Visu saw him do it, then turned to his pregnant sister-in-law, Valaiyambikai, who was still sobbing in her aunt's lap.

"Excuse me, sir," one of the reporters said, coming up to Visu. "Are you the younger raja, Viswanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan?"

Visu nodded. "Sir, you must be aware that this is a hard time for us. We have no energy to give you interviews or information. Please allow us some time to deal with our loss. Then make an appointment and come back with your queries," said Visu.

Finally, the inquisitive reporter who had been pestering Devar stepped back. Devar, seeing that Visu's was a better approach, told the reporter, "You may come back later. We have to prepare for the funeral now. There

are many formalities to be completed before it can begin." With that, he called a servant and asked him to bring the karwar.

"Have you made arrangements for the burial?" Devar asked the karwar.

"Yes, aiya. I have asked for a pit to be dug next to the tomb of the last raja, Ramanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan. The accountant has changed ten thousand rupees into small coins, but there may still be a shortage of coins for us to throw in. A hundred baskets of rose petals are on their way from Madurai. I have gotten the silver winnow and the coin-chain for the man who will perform the burial. The only snag is finding one hundred and eight Brahmin priests, and one hundred and eight cows to donate to them. However, we will solve that problem soon. There is truly a shortage of Brahmins willing to accept alms anymore!"

As the karwar listed all these things, Visu noticed one of the reporters jotting them down.

"Please do not think badly of me," requested the reporter, looking at Visu. "This is, after all, a princely funeral. The general public doesn't know the kind of rituals you follow here. Our readers will find all these strange formalities very interesting." He went on to photograph the corpse from various angles.

The evening paper carried the headline: THE MYSTERIES BEHIND THE PALACE OF KOTTAIPURAM! Below this was a detailed explanation of the curse, and below that was a series of photographs of all the men in the family who had died before they reached thirty. Finally, there was a file photo of Visu, with the caption: "This man is the last in line for the royal family. As per the curse, he has but another five and a half years to live. Will he able to beat destiny?"

At exactly five in the evening, the newspaper fell on the centre table in Archana's living room.

Unaware of everything that had happened, Archana sat in her room, eagerly awaiting Visu's call. It had been twenty-four hours since she had last seen him. It already felt like years.

Is this the beauty of being in love? she wondered. She smiled to herself. She thought back to when Visu had first joined her college. He had never

let anyone know about his royal lineage; he was just one among the other students. It was at a college day function that the principal had addressed him by his honourific title. Many were so surprised to find that they had a royal representative in their midst that their mouths opened almost wide enough to tear their cheeks up to their ears.

"Hey Visu, are you really a prince?"

"We heard the Palace of Kottaipuram is enormous. Didn't Kattabomman visit it once?"

"I heard that during colonial rule, the British used to treat the palace like their own five-star clubhouse every time they passed through that area!"

His friends had gathered around him, showering him with the little knowledge they had about his family.

His reply was sharp and decisive. "Dear friends," he said, "please don't look at me as a raja or a rich man. I am one of you! To tell you the truth, living in a palace is like being in a luxurious prison. I hate to even think of it!"

When Archana heard him speak these humble words, she understood him immediately, and opened her heart to him. And he loved Archana, as well.

Though most of the time they managed to control their urges, the flame of their youth would sometimes overpower their restraint and spark hot kisses—or melt them together, like warm blankets.

"Visu, one can spend a lifetime researching love. It's a very deep topic..."

"Of course! Otherwise, it would have gone out of style a long time ago. Love is an ocean that can never dry up, no matter how much you take out of it."

"But it's a sweet ocean, not a salty one, right?"

"If it began with Adam and Eve, moved on through literary characters like Ambikapathi and Amaravathi and Romeo and Juliet, and continues to this day to feed every scriptwriter in Tamil cinema, it must indeed be very great, Archana."

"True, Visu; love is like springtime for the heart, like a diamond that sparkles from within, like a full moon that belongs only to me."

How long since they had shared such sweet nothings!

She *had* to meet Visu today, to be close to him again. She wanted to gently bite his collarbone; she wanted to tousle his curly hair; she wanted to roll up his full sleeves so he looked like a steam engine driver; she wanted to twirl his moustache; she wanted to climb on his back like Aiyanar; she wanted to do more, much more... She wanted, wanted, *wanted!*

Flooded with romantic thoughts, Archana, in her skirt, olive-green shirt, and canvas sports shoes, with a tiny heart-shaped gold locket dangling in her cleavage, bounced down the staircase. She reached for the telephone, not even noticing that her father, Kasinathan, was sitting staring at the newspaper with a shocked expression.

She had found the number of the palace and was about to dial the STD code with a henna-tattooed fingertip, when Kasinathan's voice interrupted.

"Arch...who are you calling?"

"Hi, Dad! When did you get home? I'm calling Visu." She smiled back, happy, without actually looking at him.

"Don't. Visu isn't there right now."

She turned around quickly. "What do you mean, Dad? How do you know that Visu won't be there?"

"Right now, he must be at the palace graveyard. And very soon, he'll take up permanent residence under a tombstone there!"

Recognizing the tightness in Kasinathan's words, she approached him. He handed over the newspaper. After ten minutes of reading and re-reading the front page, it was as though Kutralam Falls was cascading from her eyes. She lay back on the sofa.

"I'm sorry, dear. I had already heard about the curse that threatens that family. Now there's proof of it. I can no longer give a green signal for your romance. You must stop thinking of him at once."

Her father's words didn't seem to reach Archana's ears. The gravity of what she had read was making her head spin.

A mother's curse that condemns them all to death at thirty! Is such a thing really possible? Are a woman's tears and frustrations so powerful? The great poet Valluvar claimed that if a chaste woman ordered it to rain, it would

rain. But there are no rains these days. Does that mean there are no longer any chaste women in this land? Or could Valluvar have been wrong? Am I to believe in this curse, or dismiss it as superstition?

Seeing how distraught she was, Kasinathan decided to leave her alone. After some time, Archana looked up to see the maid, Vasanthi, gazing down at her.

"Amma..."

"Yes, Vaṣanthi?"

"Is it the curse of Kottaipuram that's troubling you?"

"You know about it?"

"A bit... People used to think it was just a rumour. But now they believe it. I also happen to know that you are in love with that young raja."

"Who told you that?"

"I don't need anyone to tell me! I've heard you speak to him on the phone, and ramble on about him so many times."

"What do you know about the curse?"

"Generally, I don't believe in stuff like this. Not that I doubt the power of a woman's curse. But a power like that wouldn't manifest itself like some special effect in the movies. It might ruin the family through illness, poverty, or bad luck. But I can't believe that any time someone throws a curse at someone else, then Yaman the Lord of Death will show up like clockwork exactly thirty years later. If that was how things worked, this country's population would be half of what it is—everybody's bound to make enemies at some point in life. That's my opinion, anyway."

Archana reached out and grabbed Vasanthi's hand. "Vasanthi, finally a sane argument! But then, what's the real reason behind this death?"

Anxious to share Visu's pain and console him after his loss, Archana dialed his number. It took more than eight tries to get in touch with the operator, and then she had to listen to vague noises of static for a while before she was finally connected.

"This is the Samasthanam of Kottaipuram. I am the accountant speaking."

"Can I speak to Visu, please?"

"And you are?"

"Archana."

"Please wait for a moment…or else I can pass a condolence message on to my boss. The younger raja is very busy right now…"

"Sorry, I must speak to him directly."

Archana could hear the receiver being put down on a table. As she stood waiting impatiently, she heard voices speaking in the background. She strained to listen.

"Why did you drag me up here? This is the younger raja's private room. The funeral isn't even over yet. You must come back later. Don't disturb me now!"

"What does the funeral have to do with anything? Are you trying to get out of paying me my paltry fifty thousand? What, did you smuggle me all the way here in the boat from Ceylon just to cheat me? I need to be in Thalaimannar at dawn. I'd like the cash in Ceylonese money, please."

"Stop being a pain in the ass. Come back in the evening and I'll have it ready."

"Alright, but don't forget. I must have the money. It was a new snake, and I had a lot of trouble with it."

"Ssh, stop talking about that here! Or you won't make it back to Thalaimannar. Now get lost!"

The voices went out of range. Archana guessed that whoever the mysterious men were, they had left the room. She was still shell-shocked when she heard Visu's voice on the line.

"Hello, Archana," Visu said, in a soft whisper.

"Visu?"

"Yes, Archana, what is it?"

"Oh Visu, I am so sorry that you lost your brother! I read it was a snake bite."

Visu was silent.

"Visu, why don't you say something? Listen, I have something very important to tell you… That was no curse that killed your brother! There's some big conspiracy going on—"

Visu cut in, "Please, Archana. Just forget about me. I'll be dead before I turn thirty." He hung up the phone and returned to the durbar.

5

The funeral was finally over. Karwar Karunakaran stood behind a huge bronze vessel from which he was doling out measures of coins, as if they were lentils or grains of rice, to the members of Noorukudi community. Outside in the garden, dozens of cows were being off-loaded from trucks. One man was bathing them and smearing their udders with sandalwood and turmeric paste as two supervisors looked on. The oldest servant of the palace, Irusan, stood to one side, distress etched on his face, watching it all.

"Hey old man, what are you standing around for?" yelled a younger servant. "Go on, water the banana fields!"

Irusan slowly walked up to the men who were herding the cattle off the trucks.

Irusan cleared his throat. "Aiya, why are these cows here?"

"To be given as alms."

"So many of them?"

"This is a royal funeral...they can afford it, so what do you care?"

"Aiya, when our raja was bitten by the snake, Pandikutti went to save him. Do you know what happened to him?"

"Is he dead too? What is he, some bigger maharaja that I should start worrying about his funeral as well?"

"A life is a life, be it a prince's or a pauper's."

"Dey, this isn't a debate club. Go do your work."

"Aiya, don't be arrogant just because you have the money. Because of this attitude, the samasthanam has been going to the dogs for a long time..." Even before Irusan finished, a shadow fell over him. It was Thillainayagam.

"What is the problem here, Irusan?" demanded Thillainayagam haughtily.

"Oh nothing, aiya. Just that Pandikutti, who went in to save the raja, was also bitten. He is not out of danger yet. No one has even bothered to find out what happened to him. Do you think it is fair?"

"Of course not, Irusan. How is he now?"

"He has not opened his eyes yet. The village herbalist has been in to check on him..."

"Is that so? I'll drop in to see him later. For now, stop worrying. Gather the cows and take them to the raja's tomb. Make sure every cow circles it once. After that, they must be given as alms to the Brahmins. Karwar went to a lot of trouble to round up a hundred and eight Brahmins all the way from Dindigal and Madurai. Please hurry up."

With the help of two other servants, Irusan managed to herd the cows towards the palace graveyard, the bells around their necks clanging. They moved in a mass, clomping on the wet earth and kicking up clumps of dirt and grass as they walked. From somewhere, a wild bull had joined the group.

Everyone gazed at the herd of cows in amazement: the Noorukudi, pausing their work in the fields; the guests who were attending the funeral; and one stranger.

"Why are the cows going around the tomb?" this stranger asked a guest standing next to him.

"Some samasthanam tradition."

"Does this happen after every death in the royal family?"

"Yes."

"So it will happen again when the younger raja dies?"

"Why are you so eager for him to conk off? You have something against him?"

"Won't he also die before he makes it to thirty?"

"Let's say the younger one doesn't scare so easily. He's very well educated."

"And because of that, the curse will spare him, is that what you think? If the older one got an ordinary cobra, maybe this one will get a big king cobra."

"Hey, what do you mean?"

Realizing that he'd said too much, the stranger clicked his tongue and tried to slink away. As he turned, though, he felt someone shove him, and he fell amidst the stampeding feet of the cattle. The hooves of the panicking cows dug into his chest, crushing his ribs. Then the wild bull approached him. Enraged, it bent its head, aimed its sharp horns into his stomach...and in a few moments, it was all over.

The crowd, shaken, stood staring in horror.

Archana's car drove up smoothly through the palace gates. Sweeping her eyes over the splendid palace, the large crowd of people in the compound, and an agitated group in one corner, Archana parked and removed her dark glasses.

"Beautiful," she whispered.

The palace stood grand and tall, its sandalwood-yellow walls glistening, with ornately decorated balconies and windows and dark blue marble steps up to the main door. It was evident that it had seen a lot of history. Archana could understand the pride that everyone, both the royalty and the Noorukudi, took in the Palace of Kottaipuram.

Dressed in a mauve silk sari and a pink three-quarter-sleeve blouse, Archana looked angelic. The thin chain with the golden locket rested just above her firm breasts at the top of her deep cleavage, the locket's glistening blue stone obvious even at a distance. As she looked around for the main entrance, she spotted a servant clad in a short veshti and a sleeveless undershirt.

"Hey, mister..." Archana clapped to beckon him, her bangles jingling.

He came closer.

"I'm here to meet Mr. Visu. I'm his classmate."

He gaped at her.

"What are you gawking at? I said I want to see the raja."

He still seemed not to understand. Fortunately, the karwar happened to be passing by at that moment. When he spotted her, he stopped in surprise.

"Madam, are you here to see the raja?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes, where is he?"

"Come along. I'll take you to him..."

They moved along.

"It's a very large building, isn't it?"

"Of course! Hasn't the younger raja told you about his background? The history of Kottaipuram goes back centuries."

"We only recently came to know that he belonged to a royal family. Visu is a very simple man."

They were walking through a long corridor. Massive seventy-foot-tall stone pillars, as large as the ones in Nayakar Mahal, stood proud, supporting the ceiling. The floor was so clean that it mirrored their reflections.

"The younger raja is a different sort of man," said Karunakaran. "In fact, this whole younger generation, born from Divyamangalam's womb, is different."

"And who is Divyamangalam?"

"The raja's mother!"

"And the father?'

"You're asking about Ramanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan?"

"Was that his name?"

"Yes, madam! The previous raja was a very intimidating man. We used to be afraid to even stand in front of him."

"Was he very brutal?"

"Oh no, you could not have called him brutal. It was simply the attitude that comes with power."

"Did he, too, die before he turned thirty?"

"Yes madam, three months after turned twenty-nine."

"And how did he die?"

"A heart attack."

"What?" she asked, surprised. "A heart attack, so young?"

Just then, they heard a loud chorus of mournful cries.

"Oh dear, what is that hullabaloo?"

"Please, madam, that is not a hulla-whatever-you-said. They are singing an *opaari*."

"What's that?"

"The Noorukudi people have come to lament the elder raja's death. As per their custom, eighteen virgins, eighteen married women, and eighteen widows hold hands, stand in a circle, and sing an opaari—a lamentation song."

"And who are these Noorukudi?"

"They are the bonded labourers of this princely state, the descendents of the slaves who were brought here a very long time ago. There are exactly a hundred families, not one more, not one less."

"I can't believe it!"

"No? Then you should learn a little more about this samasthanam. The Noorukudi will work only for this royal family, never for anyone else. In fact, once they are over fifty years old, they will not even leave the samasthanam boundaries."

"This is all too weird!"

"Some of these customs are so strange that they make you want to laugh out loud. But in any of these ancient samasthanams, you'll find sacrosanct traditions that are still practiced."

"Okay, then, where is Visu?"

"We didn't want him to be disturbed by frequent visitors. So we've asked him to stay in his private chamber. It's our duty now to shelter him from harm, so that he, at least, can beat this bad fortune." The karwar looked up at Archana. He noticed that her face showed no sign of alarm at his mention of the curse.

But just then a commotion distracted him. They had come to the main steps. The crowd there was parting to make way for a very old, dark-skinned man with thickly matted hair and crooked yellow teeth, his features a strange mix of exotic and ugly. He was striding down the corridor, holding a long staff.

At the sight of this man, the lamenting women stopped their opaari and bowed in respect. Devar appeared from nowhere, his arms folded across his chest to greet the man.

"Who is that?" whispered Archana.

Without turning towards her, the karwar murmured, "He is Veera Nadar, the soothsayer of the Noorukudi community."

6

Archana was still feeling as if she had walked into wonderland.

Devar rose after prostrating himself at Veera Nadar's feet. Weak with sorrow, Divyamangalam and Pandiammal came to pay their respects to the soothsayer. They too fell at his feet.

"What's happening? Who's this old man, some big guru or *rishi*?" Archana asked quietly.

"You're not so far off. Can you guess his age?"

"Hmm, around eighty?"

"Add another twenty-four…"

"What? He's a hundred and four years old? You're kidding!"

"It's true. And yet, do you see him falter even a tiny bit as he walks? This is a seasoned tree, even older than Devar. People here believe that his words are those of Vengai Ponni Amman Herself. His predictions never go wrong. That's why, even though he is a Noorukudi, he is highly respected by the royals."

Visu was brought in, dressed in a loose pajama, with unkempt hair and a face wounded with distress. Archana opened her mouth to call out.

"Please, madam, do not be hasty," warned the karwar.

"What? Why?" she squawked.

"No one is allowed to address the younger raja by name. If you do so, everyone's attention will turn to you. I'm aware that you two are in love. However, no one here knows about your romance. If you must, go close to him and talk softly."

Archana saw the sense in this, and slowly moved towards Visu.

Visu stood like a statue, forlorn and dispirited.

Veera Nadar simply looked at him, not knowing how to console him.

"Thambi, do not worry," he said finally. "Nothing untoward will happen to you."

Archana chose that moment to brush against Visu's shoulder. It gave him a start; his senses began playing *pallangkuzhi* with his nerves. It took him some time to recover.

"This is the first death that has ever occurred inside the garbagraham," Veera Nadar said. "We have not given Vengai Ponni Amman the worship that is Her due; there have been no festivities for a long time. Perhaps that was why She demonstrated Her wrath. But stop worrying now, for I am here to safeguard your life.

"And yet, I must tell you," he continued, "you are making a serious mistake, which you must correct at once.

"You must do nothing to tarnish the prestige of this samasthanam. No one in this family has ever gone against these customs. I know you do not have any faith in the Goddess, but you must learn to believe in Her."

Visu understood the meaning behind Veera Nadar's words. He looked at him indignantly.

"You are surprised I know about it?" asked Veera Nadar, with a tiny smile. "Young raja, if I were to stand on your shadow for merely a second, I would be able to list your every thought and action, past, present, and future. This is the power the Goddess has granted me."

Pandiammal came forward. "What is this mistake you speak of, Veera Nadar?" she enquired nervously.

Veera Nadar continued to smile at Visu.

"Yes, tell us; what did Visu do?" asked Divyamangalam, in an unusually loud voice.

"I suppose it is just an error of youth," Veera Nadar shrugged. "I do not want to make too much of it. Maharani, you and Devar come and see me on the next full moon night. I shall explain then."

With that, he promptly turned around and walked away. Those in the gathering looked even more anguished than before, their grief seeming to have doubled.

"Devar, what does he mean?" whispered Pandiammal. Devar could only shake his head in puzzlement.

Visu took Archana aside. "What is this, Archana? Why have you come here now? You know my situation!"

"I've chosen the right moment to come."

"Don't be stupid. You must get out of this palace."

"You used to call me the love of your life. Now I visit your home for the first time, and you chase me out?"

"I'm not chasing you out, Archana. I just want you to have a happy life. Please, please forget about me."

"Never!"

"Please, Archana; I have a very short lease on life."

"You're going to live to a hundred, maybe even beyond."

"Stop it, Archana. That's what people used to say to my brother, too. I dismissed the curse then, childishly. But now I'm convinced it's true. It's the final truth, for me."

"I also know something that's true, Visu. That's why I'm sure you're going to live to be a hundred."

Archana's confidence shook Visu a bit. At the same moment, he saw Pandiammal approaching him.

"Archana… my grandmother is coming. How do I introduce you?"

"Why don't you tell her I'm your classmate? It's a fact, isn't it?"

"That won't work. I'll say you're an artist and an architect. Play along."

Pandiammal glared over Visu's shoulder at Archana for a moment, and then addressed him. "Visu, there are important people over there and you have responsibilities. You cannot keep loitering around like you used to. Who is this girl?"

"She's a famous artist and architect, Paatti. She's redone the Jaipur palace, Delhi Rashtrapathi Bhavan, and several homes of the very rich."

"So? Why do you have to speak with her here? Take her to the reception room. Why is she here now?"

"She read the news in the papers. She's come here to give her condolences."

"What? Has the news reached the media?" She turned, calling out, "Devar!"

Devar was listening to a corrupt government official expound on the interest he had in the royal family's well-being. This was no doubt a result of the official's gratitude for the sackloads of rice and lentils that the family delivered free to his house! Just as the official was going to take a dive into the ocean of despondency and start bewailing Gajendran's death, Devar heard Pandiammal's frantic call. The official immediately tucked his body into eight subservient folds and jumped over to her side, while Devar merely turned with a questioning look.

"Devar...I need to speak to you in private."

The official moved away politely.

"I hear the news has reached the media. Is that true?"

Devar nodded.

"How could you let that happen?"

"No one let it happen, Maharani. It happened on its own."

"How?"

"These are the times we live in. The media comments fearlessly even on the prime minister. Our samasthanam is hardly more important than him."

"Couldn't you have paid to shut them up? What family will let their daughter marry Visu now?"

"Rani, we're already fully drenched. Why seek to cover our head now? You can't hide a mountain under a blanket. Let the reporters keep writing. Let things unfold as they must. The other sons in this family got married, didn't they? Why do you worry, when I am here?"

Pandiammal still looked troubled.

In a private room, Visu was telling Archana, "Arch, we can't stay alone too long. It'll look bad. People will start to wonder why we're talking alone in a house that has just faced death, why I'm talking to a young woman when I'm supposed to be grieving for my brother. Please, you must leave now..."

Archana could not control her temper any longer. Her eyes burned indignantly, and her face was red.

"I didn't expect you to be so lily-livered. Any girl would like to live out her life with her flowers and pottu. No woman would opt for a difficult

situation like this. So, since I'm here, talking to you calmly, don't you think there must be a reason? Will you please listen to me?"

These words stopped Visu like a sudden air brake, and he went quiet. Archana looked around cautiously, and then recounted in a whisper the telephone conversation she had overheard. He stood motionless, as if there was a traffic jam in his bloodstream. The floor seemed to slip away beneath him and he felt as if he were floating in midair.

"Visu… Hey, Visu…"

He stared at her in disbelief. After a moment, the tight hold on his heart slackened and he took a deep breath.

"Arch, is it true? Is it really a human conspiracy? Or are you just trying to give me some kind of psychological massage? Please, Arch… be honest!"

"I swear to you, I'm telling the truth. That's exactly what I heard over the telephone."

"My god!" Beads of sweat appeared on Visu's forehead. He flopped into a seat, holding his hand to his head. A few servants entered the room, flustered.

Visu stopped one of them and asked, "What's the matter?"

"The cows that were brought to be given as alms––one of them has gored a man to death. The corpse is outside. The police have been informed…"

"What? Who died?"

"We're not sure who he is. He had Ceylonese currency in his pocket. People are saying there was a letter, too, written in Sinhala…"

The servant moved away, and Visu screwed up his lips in frustration.

Archana snapped her fingers, as though something had clicked in her mind. "Visu, one moment," she said, and walked out.

On the straight lane that led out from the southern end of the beautifully manicured palace gardens, the Noorukudi had gathered around a blood-soaked body. Archana looked at the corpse. She spotted a tattoo on the right wrist, a slithering snake that ran all the way up to the elbow. Standing at the head of the body was Irusan, who had herded the cows.

"Strangers seem to frequent the palace these days," griped someone in the crowd. "There is no clue as to who this dead man is. In the old days, no unknown person was ever allowed to step into the palace grounds... Yesterday we had a royal death, today some stranger; God knows who will die tomorrow!"

Archana turned and walked determinedly back towards the palace, deep in thought.

There was an eye spying on her from the top room of the southern wing of the palace, through a telescope. Seeing that she was thoughtful, and not mourning like the rest, the watcher felt a few butterflies fluttering in his stomach. He collapsed the telescope and got up from his seat.

7

Archana bit her nails, recollecting how she and Visu had sat, just last month, with her head on his shoulder, dreaming of their honeymoon in Russia. Now an acid rain had fallen on their dreams. Thoughtfully, Archana looked at the palace.

From the outside, it's a magnificent, stately monument. And yet its heart is cruel and menacing. Her fantasies of their married life were being threatened by someone with brutal intentions. An enigmatic mystery surrounded the beauty of this palace, and Archana was filled with both pride and fear at the thought that she was the only one who could solve the puzzle. Should she run from this conundrum or fight through to the end? There was no doubt in her mind that the man who had been gored by the bull was the same one she had overheard on the telephone.

She walked back steadily, careful not to reveal her tension.

"Madam," called a servant. "The young raja wants to see you in his room."

She went along. This was first time she had seen Visu sad, filled with the dread of waiting for his thirtieth birthday, and that lent her a sense of purpose...though she felt that even the palace steps themselves were challenging her.

A question repeated itself over and over in her mind: *What is so special about the age of thirty?*

She walked into Visu's enormous round room, where he sat crestfallen on the velvet sofa. The blue wall-to-wall carpet had absorbed the coolness of the air-conditioning. The walls were covered with works of modern art. There was a mild and pleasant fragrance of room freshener. There was no denying that Visu had excellent taste. However, Archana was in no mood to enjoy it.

"Where did you go?" asked Visu.

"To take a look at the dead man."

"What for?"

"He's our starting point out of this labyrinth."

"Can you be a little clearer, Archana?"

"His was one of the voices I heard on the telephone, Visu."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Don't you remember, I told you that one of them had asked for Ceylonese currency? Well, the dead man had some in his pocket, so he must have collected his fee. *And* he has a tattoo of a snake on his arm!"

Visu snapped to attention. "So, yet another mysterious death, eh?"

"There is nothing mysterious about it, Visu. That man was just the tool to eliminate your brother. He was the only one who could have given the game away. Whoever is masterminding this whole thing has done away with him, just like he did away with your brother, making both deaths look like accidents. There is a super criminal mind in action here."

"I still don't believe it, Archana. I cannot believe that we have enemies."

"Maybe someone's just jealous of your family."

"There is no one I can even think of suspecting. The people here would sacrifice their lives for us. But you claim they *want* our lives!"

"Well, we can check if my claim is true or false by going to the temple. Is there a stone drain in the garbagraham that the snake could have got in through?"

"Yes, we should check that. But not now. I won't be allowed to leave this palace for another ten days."

"Don't tell me you can't find some way to sneak out!"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you—it's impossible. Moreover, the temple is ten miles away. We can't do that stretch in the night, alone."

"This is an emergency, Visu! You can't afford to lose a moment."

"Don't you think I need to know the truth too? My head will burst otherwise! I would rather die trying to find the truth than as the victim of a conspiracy."

"Can you talk about nothing but death? Don't you think it's possible we might solve the mystery and *live*?"

"I'm beginning to believe that it all depends on you, Archana. But you live in Madurai, miles away from Kottaipuram. To solve the mystery you'll need to be here. Let's figure out a way that you can stay."

There was a knock. Visu rose to turn the ivory handle on the teak door. It was his mother, Divyamangalam.

"Amma! Please come in." Visu welcomed her with all his heart. Divyamangalam entered, running her sorrow-filled eyes around the room and finally resting them on Archana. "Who is she?" she demanded.

Visu hadn't thought of what to say, and he was momentarily speechless. Archana's sharp brain saved the moment.

"I am an artist and an architect. Visu told me he had some paintings that needed to be renovated. I came to have a look."

"Couldn't you come back at a better time? And anyway, there are other paintings besides the ones in Visu's room!"

There was an uncomfortable silence. Visu broke it.

"I brought her here, Amma. There was a stream of condolence visitors in the durbar. They might think badly of us. It was Paatti's idea…"

At the mention of the maharani, Visu's mother relaxed a bit, and looked back at Archana. She surveyed her tall, slim, wax-doll figure, somewhat worried that her son might be easily tempted by this kind of beauty.

"What is it, Amma?" Visu asked.

"I'm restless," said Divyamangalam. "I had to come talk to you. Every time I close my eyes for even a second, all I see is your brother's face crying out…"

Tears poured from her eyes. Both Visu and Archana were visibly shaken. Visu went up and held both her hands, not knowing how else to comfort her. A gentle breeze rustled the trees around the palace grounds and blew in through the open windows, enveloping the two of them.

Suddenly there was the loud groan of an *urumi* drum.

"What is that, Amma?" asked Visu.

Divyamangalam peeked out the window. "Devar is leading a group to the temple."

"Now? Why?"

"Your brother's death inside the garbagraham has sullied it. They are going to purify the premises."

"Can't they wait till tomorrow?"

"Vengai Ponni Amman is a very demanding goddess. She will not tolerate going without worship, even for a day. Veera Nadar has told us—"

"Amma, do you really believe all that stuff?"

"How dare you even ask that, *da*? Slap your cheeks! Vengai Ponni's wrath is what killed your brother. The snake is Her ornament."

"What did we do to arouse her wrath, Amma? Even if we did do something wrong, it is for other humans to punish us. A god's job is to put up with our failings and point us down the right path. If I am to believe what you say, then your god is as petty as we humans."

"Dey, how can you say such things? This is all because we sent you off to the city for college!"

"I'm sorry Amma, but what did I say to upset you?"

"Do you think you're so clever that you can dictate which jobs are for humans and which are for God? Veera Nadar was right; you have no faith in Vengai Ponni Amman!"

Archana, feeling awkward, tried to smooth the situation. "Come on Visu, don't you realize Vengai Ponni Amman's power? She is the one who grants our every wish. Even I know that!"

This had its intended effect; Divyamangalam was pleased. "Thank you, my dear! Keep reminding him of that! Visu is all I have left. I am afraid this lack of faith will be the end of him. Isn't losing Gajendran enough?" she wailed. "Dey, Visu, stop being stupid. Pay heed to what Veera Nadar says. His words are those of Amman Herself. If not for him, I never would have left my anonymous village and become the rani of this samasthanam."

"What do you mean, Amma?"

"Without Veera Nadar's blessings, no woman can hope to become a rani here. That was how Valaiyambikai became your brother's wife. You have no clue about all this because you spent most of your time in boarding school. In fact, he has already selected the girl for *you* to wed, as well…"

This final bombshell made Visu cry out. "*What*? Who is he to select the woman I have to marry?"

"Idiot! Our lives are destined to be cut short; our men will die at thirty, and we women are doomed to loneliness. Do you think the princess from the next samasthanam is going to rush over to marry you? We *need* the help of an elder like Veera Nadar."

"If I'm to die at thirty, what do I need a marriage for, anyway?"

"You must marry! So you will have an heir! You don't understand how hard we pray for a girl child, one who will be able to open the bamboo box and relieve us from this perennial agony. Hopefully Valaiyambikai will have a daughter, who will make sure you live long."

Sighing, Divyamangalam left the room. Visu could only stare dumbly at Archana.

"Visu," whispered Archana, "what's this bamboo box your mother was talking about?"

"Shh, quiet! That box holds the key to the curse."

They had not yet noticed the ear that was plastered to the window, eavesdropping on their every word.

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Archana turned. Only then, through the frosted glass, did she notice the silhouette of a person huddled against the window. She jumped, as if she had stepped on a thorn. Not noticing her agitation, Visu began to speak.

"That bamboo box is kept inside the palace's puja room. It's a very old box, perhaps from my great-grandfather's time. Every woman who comes into this palace through marriage must worship it every full moon night, without fail. She must also fall at the feet of a Noorukudi virgin and gift her a sari."

As Visu rattled on, Archana approached him quietly, tapped his shoulder with her right hand, and pointed to the window.

At first, Visu did not comprehend. When he did, he clicked his tongue reprovingly. Archana signaled him to go on talking, but he did not take the hint.

"What is this new habit of eavesdropping!" he said aloud, his eyes blazing with anger.

Archana tiptoed to the door, opened it, and peered out silently. In the dim light spilling from the durbar, she saw the bare back of a powerfully built man. In the center of the back was a mole shaped like a seventh-day crescent moon.

Shoving her aside, Visu barged out, calling angrily, "Who is that at the window?"

The man hastily turned round. Seeing Archana, he disappeared quickly into the darkness.

"What did you do that for, Visu?" Archana demanded, irritated.

"What did *I* do?"

"I was hoping to catch him red-handed! You had to lose your temper and ruin my plans…"

"No one in this samasthanam has ever stooped to eavesdropping before, Arch!"

"Or, if they did, they kept quiet about it. Which is more than you can say!"

"What do you mean, Archana?"

"Oh, forget it! Anyway, now do you believe me? Do you accept that there must be a conspiracy going on here?"

Terror clouded Visu's face.

"Archana, why is all this happening to me? Who was that man and what was he doing at my window?" he asked in a quivering voice.

Archana moved closer, wrapped her arms around his waist, and pulled him towards her. "Hey, what is this?" she asked softly. "Don't lose your courage now! You're behaving like a kid who refuses to bathe because he's afraid of the cold. Don't let this bring you down."

Visu was silent.

"Hey, come on, *yaar*! We will solve this mystery, no matter how difficult it gets. We'll beat even the strongest enemies. It's not as if they're the only ones with smarts! We've got brains too, plenty! Think of all the films you've seen, all the stories you've read. Didn't you *ooh* and *aah* at the hero for all his brave stunts? Now it's *our* chance to be the heroes. We can't miss this opportunity, Visu."

Archana's words improved his mood some. He gently caressed her arms.

"Arch, I truly am a lucky man."

"How's that?" she asked with a wink.

"Had I not fallen in love with you, there's no way I would have learned the truth. I would have readied myself to be bitten by a snake before I turned thirty. I would have sworn that the curse was true. Now you've made me understand what's really going on…"

"Stop it, now you're sounding soppy. Keep in mind, there are people watching your every move. I'm a surprise visitor who just arrived today. I've been in here with you for almost an hour. Your adversaries will be wondering what we're doing, whether we know something. We can't afford to reveal that we've gotten wise. You must continue to act like an idiot."

"Hey!"

"I mean, act like you're an ardent believer in Vengai Ponni Amman, like your brother was. Act extra polite and courteous to all these charlatans who are trying to run the samasthanam. Act like you're convinced about the curse."

Visu nodded with enthusiasm.

"I should be getting home," said Archana. "It's late. My dad will begin to worry. If I wait too much longer, he might even report me missing."

"Arch, didn't you say your dad was coming over to talk to my folks about us?"

"I did. But this news about the curse has changed everything. He wants me to forget you. Should I?"

Visu's expression hardened, as though cast in concrete.

"Hey," said Archana, "stop taking everything so seriously. This is all a part of romance. It was starting to seem too easy, with nobody opposing our affair. Your Vengai Ponni Amman took care of that!"

How is she able to keep all the fear, tension, and confusion from her face and be so cheerful? Visu marveled.

"When will you return?" he asked.

"Don't ask when, ask how."

"Tell me!"

"You stay cool for the next ten days. Let the mourning period pass. On the eleventh day, I will arrive with tins of paint, books on architecture, and my maid, Vasanthi, as if I'm working on a renovation project."

"Okay. How will you manage your family?"

"Dad won't be a problem. I just have to refuse to eat one meal, and he'll give in to anything I say. He'll happily put me on a bus to Ooty, Kodaikanal, wherever I demand to go."

"So, that's going to be your story at home? A trip to Ooty?"

"That's right! Actually, Ooty might not be the best idea. If my dad suddenly decides he wants to see me, he could simply drive up. Maybe I should say I'm going to Kashmir or Simla."

"It's a great idea, Arch! I'm sad, though—I have nothing to do but wait for these ten days to pass."

She glanced at her wristwatch. "Exactly sixty-seven minutes ago, you were chasing me out of this place. Now you don't want me to go. You're nuts, Visu, okay!"

He pulled her close and held her tight.

"Do you expect me to exclaim like a film heroine and beg you to let me go? Forget it! I want it tighter."

The hug was strong enough to snap the first hook of her *choli*.

"Will this do?" he grinned.

"Better, but I could do with more."

He bent down and brushed his lips against hers. A fast, throbbing dance rhythm sped through miles of nerves and blood vessels.

After a long moment, he pushed her away from him.

Her face was red. Tiny tear droplets clung to her eyelashes.

"Visu, I want us to be close like this forever. No power on earth will separate us. No power *can*!" she sobbed.

"Archana! Are you crying?!"

"I'm a woman, Visu," she said. "I try to sound strong, but I'm scared, too. I'm not sure I'll be able to stand these ten days away from you, either." She wiped her wet eyes with her sari *pallu*. Calming herself, she whispered, "I should be on my way."

Together they walked out of the bedroom and into the durbar. They looked composed, but Visu was already beginning to feel the fear creeping back.

The crowd in the durbar had thinned a bit. In the centre was the ornate bed on which Gajendran's body was laid. Behind it was a full-size photograph of him. In the front was a tall, lit kuthuvillaku. Next to it was a small *diya*, also burning. They approached the bed.

The sight of that innocent face, now framed in a photograph because of the unjust killing, angered Archana. *I swear on you, Mister Gajendran. There will be no more mysterious deaths in this palace!*

As they walked to the front door, Thillainayagam approached them.

"Raja, I need to speak to you."

"What is it, Thillainayagam?"

"Unfortunately, a stranger was gored to death on our premises. The police have registered a case. If you can personally call the S.P. and use your influence, he'll close the case without much ado…"

"How can you even ask me something like that?"

Thillainayagam stood in an uncomfortable silence.

"Let the law take its proper course of action," snapped Visu.

Archana couldn't help her irritation. "Visu," she whispered in his ear, "will you please do as he says? We have to be cautious, now."

"Oh all right," he told Thillainayagam. "You call them first, I'll talk to them later and put in a word."

Thillainayagam looked at Archana strangely. It was difficult to read what he was thinking. As she and Visu moved to the main gate, Thillainayagam rushed to the telephone to dial, and got the police on the other end.

"Sir, this is Thillainayagam speaking. The young raja wants you to investigate the case thoroughly," he said.

"If you are convinced it was an accident, then there is no problem," said the voice on the other end of the line. "I don't suspect you of lying."

"No, sir. Please do a complete investigation. Strange things have been happening in the palace lately."

"I don't understand."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm a little disconcerted," said Thillainayagam, and he cut the call.

As he turned, a man wearing a cotton veshti and a cheap Kuthalam towel on his shoulder came up to him.

"Aiya…"

"Yes, Samikannu?"

"Pandikutti has taken a turn for the worse. It looks like we have to rush him to Madurai."

"Well, what are we waiting for? Come along," ordered Thillainayagam, going out with him.

The new white van was parked near the gate. The driver stood behind it, smoking a beedi. Seeing Thillainayagam, he hurriedly flung away the butt.

"Hurry, start the van! We need to take Pandikutti to Madurai. Go bring him."

They had no stretcher to carry him, so Pandikutti was brought out in an old blanket slung to a bamboo pole, hauled by two Noorukudi men.

Far away, on the balcony of the top floor, a pair of eyes was watching them.

"Start the van!" said Thillainayagam.

"I'm sorry, aiya, but the accountant has said I cannot take the van out without his permission."

"I'll explain it to him."

The driver stood by, uncomfortable.

Just then, Archana's car drove up. She got out, giving Pandikutti a concerned look. "Any problem?" she asked.

Thillainayagam explained the crisis.

"Oh! We can take him in my car," she said.

They quickly laid Pandikutti in the back seat. One Noorukudi man sat at his head and another at his feet. Thillainayagam got into the front seat.

The car sped towards Madurai.

The pair of eyes on the balcony became thoughtful.

9

Realizing Pandikutti's condition, Archana drove the car like a storm.

A line of surprise appeared on Thillainayagam's forehead. *Can a woman really drive this fast?*

"Has the venom been extracted?" enquired Archana, looking back as she drove.

"Has it?" Thillainayagam asked the two men in the back seat.

"All we know is that the herbalist had a look," said one of the men.

"It was a full-grown snake; it sent the elder raja to his death," said the other. "Fortunately, it had already bitten once. That's the only reason Pandikutti has even lasted this long. We couldn't get anyone's attention at the palace; everyone there was busy with the raja's funeral. There were coats and suits all over the place…"

"Why didn't you take him to a real doctor?" Archana snapped.

"Who are these 'real doctors,' and where are we supposed to find them? Anyway, we were busy at the funeral too. Were we supposed to tend to Pandikutti or the raja?"

The car was taking the curves at a frightening speed, and blood rushed to their heads.

"This car's a lot faster than our horse cart, eh?" said one of the Noorukudi men.

"Our *horse cart*? You biscuit, it's even faster than our tractor!" said the other.

"What are they talking about?" asked Archana, bewildered. "Have they never travelled in a car before?"

"It's not just them. Probably less than half of the Noorukudi community has ever stepped outside the boundaries of the samasthanam."

"What? Why?"

"It's an unwritten rule of the state," the two men replied, in unison.

"I don't get it."

"Permit me to explain, madam," said Thillainayagam, speaking softly. "They are slaves; though of course we don't refer to them as such. Instead, we call them Noorukudi. Their traditions are strange and convoluted; if you ask one of them to touch his nose, he'll do it by reaching around the back of his head. If the rest of us have one way of doing things, they'll have another. They're hard workers; it's because of their labour that the palace shines the way it does. They never seek a bride outside their community, and very rarely do they give a daughter to an outsider. Veera Nadar is their spiritual leader, but they accept the word of the raja and rani as the word of God.

"In colonial times, many British visitors used to come to the samasthanam. The Noorukudi slaves would press their legs and fan them to sleep. One of these slaves was called Nanduvadakaan. A different sort of name, you may think; and he was a different sort of man. He was smart. Somehow, he taught himself to read and write, and got involved in the freedom struggle. He openly opposed the British. In Tuticorin, at one of the protest rallies led by V.O.C., he was beaten up by the police. The raja of the samasthanam at that time, Vengai Rajan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan, came to know of it. The rulers of Kottaipuram were always puppets of the whites. So the raja took Nanduvadakaan to task. That was the day this rule was laid down, that the Noorukudi should never cross the samasthanam boundaries.

"Many follow the rule even today. Some members of this generation have travelled to the city, but that's only because Gajendran was a rare gem, a gentle sort who never objected..."

Thillainayagam's long tale spun around Archana like rings of fire. *Can such Hitler-like oppression really exist, even here and now?* she wondered. Turning around, she glanced at the two men in the back seat.

Shirtless, hairy-chested, and wide-eyed—it was obvious from their expressions that they were completely absorbed in the experience of travelling by automobile. *Imagine, such an ordinary thing as riding in a car actually giving grown men such a big thrill!* Archana exhaled in disbelief.

"By the way, madam, you haven't told us who you are yet," said Thillainayagam.

"I'm Archana."

"And what brought you to the palace?"

"I am an architect, and an artist too. I'm working on a renovation of the palace paintings."

In the middle of this bare-faced lie, she swerved to avoid an oncoming lorry, raising a storm of dust before turning back onto the tar road. The two men in the back seat sneezed.

Thillainayagam seemed deep in thought.

"So, what are you thinking now?" asked Archana.

"I wasn't aware that the paintings in the palace needed to be renovated…"

"Should you have been aware?"

"Nothing happens in the palace without my knowledge. I am Devar's personal assistant."

"Is Devar such a big shot? By the way, you didn't tell me your name."

"Thillainayagam. Did you just ask me if Devar is a *big shot*? If I were to tell those two in the back that Devar commanded them to jump out of the car and die, they would do it! His name alone has that much power."

"Those two are illiterates, who have been slaves for generations," Archana said quietly. "Of course they would do it. But would the royal family obey him so blindly?"

"Do you mean someone in particular?"

"Yes, I mean the young raja, Viswanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan."

"I see! So he's the one who called you?"

"Well, doesn't he have the right?"

"*Chee, chee!* Of course he does. He is now the head of the samasthanam. But he hardly ever gets involved in the affairs of the state. Normally it is Devar who gives the orders, and we who obey."

"Just who is this Devar?"

"How can you ask that?"

"Because I don't know!"

The car was now on the road to the Madurai Airport. Far away on the horizon was an Avro aircraft heading towards the runway. The man at Pandikutti's head watched it open-mouthed.

"Dey! Dey! Look at the airplane!" he shouted, as if he were a little kid in half-pants.

Archana reduced her speed a bit so they could get a good look. She threw a glance at Thillainayagam's frozen face.

"No answer?"

He turned towards her slowly. "To put it simply, Devar is like a god to this samasthanam. If you really want me to elaborate, I could go on all day."

"What's his relation to the royal family?"

"In the old days, he would have been called the rajaguru. Of course, you'd laugh if I called him that today. In fact, not many even call the samasthanam a samasthanam anymore; they just call it the Palace of Kottaipuram."

Realizing that she couldn't ask much more without arousing his suspicions, Archana kept quiet. With a pleasant smile on her face, she drove into the Madurai city limits. She had to slow down for a group of adamant water buffaloes that were staging a protest for some reason next to the Avaniapuram sewage plant. A white Pandian town bus tore through the herd, blaring its horn.

In the back seat, Pandikutti gave a pained groan. A terrible stench drifted up from the froth in his mouth. His body jerked twice.

Archana navigated through the buffaloes. They glared at the car bonnet as it nudged them.

The car regained speed.

"You drive very well, madam," said Thillainayagam.

"Thank you!"

"We've reached Madurai... Can you take us to a good nursing home, please?"

The car drove up the gravel path of Karthika Nursing Home.

"My classmate's sister, Vasumathi, is the doctor here," said Archana. "She's very good."

Pandikutti was carried in on a stretcher. The emergency medical specialist gave him an injection and put him on a glucose drip.

"Mr. Thillainayagam, there's nothing more to worry about. He's in good hands. Let these other two stay with him. You can leave if you want to," said Archana.

Thillainayagam hesitated for a moment, and then asked, "Did I trouble you too much?"

"Of course not. It was my pleasure to be of help."

"Thank you so much. Though I have thousands of chores at the palace, I had to come along to make sure he was safe. Pandikutti is the most courageous man among the Noorukudi. Devar places a lot of trust in him. No one will be happier than me to see him out of danger," he said, pulling out a few hundred-rupee notes from his shirt pocket.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Thillainayagam. I have to leave soon. The doctor says Pandikutti will have to stay here for four days."

Thillainayagam handed the money over to the two men with the instruction, "Take care of him. I'll come tomorrow."

"I'll drop you at the bus station," offered Archana.

The car drove towards Periyar Bus Stand.

"Is there a bus that goes by Kottaipuram?"

"I'll have to check. I may have to take a cab."

"That far? Are you sure you don't want me to drive you back?"

"No madam. You've done enough."

She dropped him at the bus station, which was jam-packed with milling crowds, and waved goodbye with a smile. Thillainayagam went off in search of a cab.

The car pulled up at the gate of a beautiful bungalow in a remote, peaceful corner in Anna Nagar. The watchman glared at her.

"What are you staring at, Thukkaram?" asked Archana.

"Oh nothing, madam, it's just that your father has been leaping from sky to earth, wild with anger. He's been yelling at all of us. 'How dare she take the car! Why is she so late?'"

"What does he think, I'm a little baby still sucking my thumb? Come on, I'm a grown woman now!" She was still grumbling as she entered the house.

The front hall was empty.

"Where's my father?" she asked a passing servant.

"He's having a shower."

"What's this parcel?" She pointed to a wrapped packet on the centre table.

"A man dropped it off a little while ago."

"Who is it for?"

"He said it's for you."

Archana picked it up, surprised. The pretty wrapping paper seemed to beam at her. Her name was written on the card. She hurriedly unwrapped it, as the servant looked on with interest.

In a tiny box within a box within a box, she found a single rose.

Just one flower!

Underneath it was a letter.

She opened the letter. It read:

Don't interfere in matters that do not concern you, or your youthful beauty will go to waste. The curse is as sacred as the Vedas; it can never be broken, even by the wisest of sages. You are too young to become a widow. We wish you a long life, like this rose blossom!

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Archana was stunned. How could words so poetic induce such terror? She read the note again, then flopped helplessly onto the sofa. She pushed away a lock of hair that fell over her face, and stared up at the ceiling. Her heart was beating fast.

"Who is it from?" asked the servant.

She threw him a fiery look. "None of your business!"

A cloud of aftershave fragrance wafted into the room. Kasinathan had just emerged from his shower, dressed in a blue silk veshti and a white *kurta*. It was clear from his attire that he was not planning on going out. Seeing Archana gazing emptily at the ceiling, he came over and sat on the sofa in front of her.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

There was no reply.

"Where have you been all day? I hear that you left early in the morning..."

She remained silent.

"Archana, what is this behaviour? I demand an answer! Where were you?"

"At the club," she said, folding the note. The answer came out sounding a little too pat.

"Which club?"

"How many clubs are there in Madurai?"

"I called the club. They said you weren't there."

Her expression changed.

"What's this parcel?" he asked. "Just a single rose?"

"Yeah. A friend sent it."

"She sent you a rose? In a parcel? Like this? What's that letter in your hand?"

"Dad, can you leave me alone for a bit?"

"Leave you alone!? What about my peace of mind?"

"How did I disturb your peace of mind?"

"If you disappear for a whole day to Kottaipuram, how am I supposed to stay calm?"

"Fine, Dad," said Archana, "I don't want to lie to you. I did go there. I went to give my condolences to Visu. Is that so wrong?"

"Fine, you've given your condolences. That's enough. You will not set foot there again. Start concentrating on your master's course in the U.S."

"I understand what you're asking me to do, Dad. But I'm sorry, I refuse to allow you to destroy my love for Visu."

"Don't talk back to me, Archana! I'm not against romance, and you know it. Yet you choose to paint me as the devil."

"As if I don't know you! But if you're not against romance, then why are you objecting to mine? Are you really telling me that *you* believe in a supernatural curse? *You?* My father, the member of modern society, the advocate of rationalism?"

"Look Archana, ninety percent of the people in this world have very fragile hearts. Maybe about ten in a hundred have hearts of iron. Where you're concerned, mine is fragile."

"Dad, I don't have time to listen to stories about fragile hearts and iron hearts. Just tell me, plainly, which side you're on. Do you believe in the curse or not?"

There was a long silence. The tension in his furrowed brow travelled to his clenched fingers, then to his lips, and finally parted them to blurt out, "Yes!"

Archana felt like there was a centipede crawling in her stomach. "Dad, this isn't just about me. Please, be true to *yourself!* Think hard. I know you well. I've grown up hearing you say that most of this nation's so-called faith is really just people holding out their cupped palms like beggars and asking the supreme power for handouts, instead of the true devotion that cleanses one's soul. And now you're saying you believe in *curses*?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying! That curse is real, and it won't spare any member of that family! I don't know what sin they committed to deserve it, but every male there has a very short lease—"

"Dad, can I tell you something? There is no curse. It's a man-made conspiracy."

"Oh, is that your new spin on it?"

"Dad, I'm not spinning anything. I know it's true—"

"No! I don't believe you! You're just trying to assuage my fears. You're young; you have no clue about how the real world functions. Stop inventing stories just because you're in love. I don't want to discuss this any

further. You're forbidden to go there anymore. If you disobey, don't be surprised if I turn merciless!"

"Dad, please, at least hear me out—"

"I don't care what you have to tell me, Archana. That samasthanam has a history stretching back over two hundred years, and for many, many generations, their men have been dying young. No human plot can last so long!

"I've given this a lot of thought, from all different angles. The media, too, is shredding the story to bits. I'm not interested in hearing another word about it from you. Concentrate on leaving for the States. Get your mark sheets. I've heard the American consul general's office is very strict about issuing visas. I want you to get it on your own merit, not just because you're my daughter." Before he even completed the sentence, he was walking out to the swing on the lawn.

Bees buzzed around the rose blossoms. The gardener was watering the jasmine bushes.

Did I come down on her too hard? Kasinathan wondered with a sigh, as he gazed up at the patches of clouds. *No… I am in the right. Love is only an extension of lust. If lust were an idol, then love would be its golden shield. I have to find her someone else, someone even more appealing than Visu. With time, she'll come around. I've solved bigger problems than this—this is nothing.*

As these thoughts raced through his mind, the phone in the living room rang. Archana answered the call. It was the doctor, Vasumathi.

"Am I speaking to Archana?"

"This is she."

"Archana, the patient's condition has taken a turn for the worse. Can you come here?"

"What? You said he would be fine!"

"I don't know what to say. When I admitted him, the venom had not yet reached his brain. Now it has. I've done everything I could. I think we should move him to a bigger hospital."

"I'm not sure I can get away right now. Is it all right if I call the palace and ask them to send someone?"

"That's fine by me, but he says he wants to see you."

"Me? He doesn't even know me!"

"Look, there's no time to explain, Archana. He says he wants to tell you a secret."

"Okay, okay. I'll be there as quickly as I can."

She rushed out to her Luna, which was parked next to the Maruti on the portico.

"Where are you off to?" her father asked.

"Just going for a ride to clear my head," she said, with forced casualness.

"All right, drive safe!"

"Sure, Dad..."

As her moped bumped over the potholes, her ripe breasts jiggled like a collection box. The unruly curves in the road made her soft hair whip from side to side.

What can Pandikutti want to tell me? she wondered.

At a signal, a constable blew his whistle to stop the traffic. She was caught in the midst of a crowd of vehicles. Hoots and hollers from dark lips beneath youthful moustaches vied for her attention. Several pairs of eyes sized her up, wishing ardently for her sari pallu to slip a bit.

She ignored them all. When the signal changed, she kicked to restart the moped.

At the clinic gate, the two Noorukudi men were waiting.

"Madam, since you left, Pandikutti has been getting worse," said one of them. "He only opened his eyes once. We told him about you, and he was touched by your concern. He wanted to meet you immediately."

She raced down the corridor, through the medicinal smells and hurrying nurses, towards the I.C.U., where Pandikutti was.

Dr. Vasumathi turned around.

"Come in, Archana. He has to be moved to a bigger hospital, and soon, so don't take too long. I don't want him dying here; we'll have a police case on our hands and it'll be a blotch on my name. Hurry up!"

With his wrists strapped down—a saline IV needle in one of them—and a cylinder of oxygen helping him breathe, Pandikutti lay on the bed. His lips were cracked and blue. The whites of his eyes were barely visible through his half-open lids.

One of the two Noorukudi men bent down and whispered. "Pandikutti, this is the woman who brought you here. You wanted to meet her."

Pandikutti opened his eyes with great difficulty, slowly focusing on Archana. The two men left them alone in the room.

"*Vanakkam*, madam. Are you a relative of the royal family, or a friend?"

"Why?" she asked.

"It's important."

"I'm a friend. What did you want to tell me?"

"If it was something I could tell to just anyone, I would have said it by now and breathed my last..."

Archana could tell there was some terrible burden troubling him. "I hope to marry the prince," she said. "Does that answer your question?"

"I am so happy to hear that, madam," he said with a groan.

Archana had to lean close to hear him.

"Please tell my sister, Chellammal, to leave Kottaipuram. She is now eight months pregnant. The doctors have confirmed that it is a boy. Her husband is an alcoholic. I don't want that child to die when he turns thirty! You must insist that she leaves at once. But please...be as secretive as you can. May Lord Murugan bless you with a long and happy married life. Our beloved rani Valaiyambikai is going to have a gir...a gir..."

With a loud choke, his life departed.

His last words echoed in Archana's mind.

11

Disoriented, Archana stepped out of the ward. The two men waiting outside sprang up. "Madam, how is he? What did he say?" they cried in unison.

Vasumathi, the doctor, asked eagerly, "Are you through, Archana? I've informed General Hospital—though I told them that you only brought him in just now. Let's hurry and get him there... Is there anything wrong?"

"Doctor, he just died."

"What?" demanded Vasumathi, and rushed into the ward. Her face went as pale as if it had been acid-washed. The two men followed.

The doctor lifted Pandikutti's lifeless hand to check his pulse.

"My god!"

The Noorukudi men started to cry with loud laments. "*Aiyyo*, Pandikutti, have you really gone and abandoned us forever? You were a lion; bravest among the brave! But our maharajas have packed you off to heaven…"

Archana stepped to the doctor's side and quietly asked, "What do we do now, Doctor?"

Vasumathi gave a long sigh. *This is all your fault!* she wanted to say, but friendship stopped her.

"If we keep this amongst ourselves, we can avoid police problems. Just take him away quietly. What do you say?"

"Fine, but can I please make a phone call to the palace?"

"Sure."

Archana ran to the phone in the lobby to call Visu.

"Hey Arch, what's going on?"

"Visu, I have bad news. Remember your brother's bodyguard, Pandikutti, who was bitten by the same snake?"

"Yeah…"

"He died just now. I brought him to my friend's clinic, in Madurai, but they couldn't save him."

"Why the hell did you get involved in that?"

"What do you mean? I had to do it. It was the right thing to do."

"The right thing? Those people are a bunch of uneducated idiots! They blindly obey Devar and my grandmother, and no one else."

"Visu, I really don't need this now. What do I do with the body? If I wait too long, it could become a police case. Dr. Vasumathi only admitted him because she's my friend."

"Then have them send his body here. I'll inform Devar."

"Thanks, Visu. One more thing…"

"Yeah?"

"Do you know someone named Chellammal?"

"No clue. Who?"

"Pandikutti's sister. I believe she's eight months pregnant now."

"Hey, where did you get all this information from? How come you know so much? You are great, yaar! I hardly know anything about the Noorukudi community. What about this Chellammal?"

"She's probably the next step to solving our mystery. As he was dying, Pandikutti gave me a few clues. I wasn't expecting that! The voices I heard on the phone, the information Pandikutti gave me... It's like the mystery is challenging me. *Solve me, solve me, solve me!* It's like I can hear it, Visu."

"Relax. We'll talk later when we meet. Come here right away."

"Sorry Visu, I can't. My father's sitting on his sofa on top of a volcano that's about to erupt, ordering me around and demanding that I stop thinking about you. He wants me to leave for the States immediately."

"What?!" Visu almost collapsed at the other end.

"Well," said Archana, "he is my dad, after all. He has to talk like that. But don't worry. If I can't get by him, then my name's not Archana!"

"Okay. Will you come after you send off the body?"

"Not today. But I'll be there tomorrow. What will your story be, while I'm there?"

"Just come. I'll think of something by then."

"Good! By the time I get there, find out who Chellammal is, okay?"

She cut the call, slightly relieved.

A completely bored driver left for Kottaipuram in the nursing home van, carrying Pandikutti's body and the two Noorukudi men.

"Phew!" sighed the doctor.

"I was even more tense than you. It's only now that I've relaxed a bit," said Archana.

"What's your connection with that samasthanam, Archana? How do you know those royal folks?"

"Didn't your sister tell you?"

"Who, Shyamala? I haven't spoken to her in months."

"The younger raja is our classmate."

"Ah! I read about that family in the paper just yesterday. It's amazing things like this can still happen in the twentieth century."

"Do you really believe that crap?"

"There are so many things beyond our comprehension, Archana. One *has* to believe."

"But I don't, Doctor. I think there's a terrible plot going on here. It's like a huge tree—you can't see the roots, so you don't know what's underneath it all; you just see what's going on above ground."

"What makes you say that?"

Vasumathi's question almost brought out an answer, but Archana quickly bit it back. *Right now, keep your mouth shut*, said a blinking red light in her brain.

"Just a guess, Doctor. I should be leaving. My dad will be worried. Tell Shyamala I said hi." She rose to leave.

A gentle breeze swept through the vast green fields. The ankle-high groundnut plants swayed. Mice, daring out of their burrows, happily gnawed at the nuts that grew at the roots. The expansive stretch of field, bordered by small irrigation canals, pronounced the wealth of the feudal estate. There was a motored pipe pumping out water at one end. The water gushed out like blood from a knife wound.

At the other end, Choolai was diverting the flow, expertly, into the groundnut fields with a hoe.

He was slightly drunk—actually, more than slightly. He was beginning to feel as though the ground he was standing on was moving as fast as an express train. In his foggy-minded state, he dropped the hoe on his foot, and yelled out in pain.

Standing along the ridges of one of the canals, like a lonely maiden, was a solitary neem tree. Under its cool shade sat Chellammal, with a pot of *kanji*, enjoying the rare sight of her husband actually doing some work.

With a look up to the sky, she murmured: *Amma, Thayi, Vengai Ponni: Please send your blessings, and make sure that this man of mine toils with this same sense of responsibility all his life!*

All around her, she could see people of her community, labouring hard.

Irusan was watering the cattle, looking very depressed.

"Anna…" Chellammal called out to him.

"Yes, Chellammal?" he asked, pulling a stubborn bull behind him.

"You look worried. Is anything wrong?"

"Well... I don't know. Working for these royals is going be the death of me. Yesterday, I was told to herd the cows. Not just one or two, eh, but a hundred and eight head! Somehow, a wild bull turned up among them, too.

"While I was doing that, some jackass had to go trip and fall under their hooves, get trampled, and then get his guts gored by the bull. That was the beginning of my misfortune; Saturn must be against me these days."

"What misfortune?" enquired Choolai, who had just arrived for his kanji, limping on account of his hurt toe.

Irusan knew that Choolai, unlike his wife Chellammal, was someone who would always take the side of the royals, even in the most trivial of matters. "We Noorukudi were born nomads," he would always proclaim. "If not for the lords of this samasthanam, we might still be wandering from town to town, performing circus tricks on the streets, instead of living decent human lives ploughing fields." He would brook no counter-argument. Most of the Noorukudi thought the same way.

"You morons will never change," Irusan had tried saying many times. "Not a single one of you has any pride. It's not good blood flowing in your veins, it's gutter-water. The moneyed folk are like puppeteers playing with us. You nitwits are dancing to their tunes."

But he had given up trying to convince any of them long ago. Still, there was a weary helplessness that churned inside him like a storm.

"I asked you a question. What misfortune?" Choolai did not want to let it go.

"Forget it. We'll only get into an unnecessary war of words."

"Come on, this isn't some bitter *manathakkaali keerai* that you can take a bite of and then spit out. If you have something to say, say it!"

"Well, it's about the guy who got gored by the bull. The police are still digging into it. Thillainayagam Aiya told me, 'Irusan, don't be scared. If the police call you, go to the station and tell them everything you saw.' But if I am called, everything could turn against me. They'll catch me, the way you catch a chicken with a basket, and accuse *me* of being

a killer! Will a poor man's word ever stand up in court? It never has, on the grounds of this samasthanam..."

"Quit whining! When such a gory death occurs, it's a routine thing for the police to step in. What's so wrong with that?"

"Shut up about routines, all right? You people have no brains of your own. If there's going to be an inquiry into this stranger's death, then why weren't the police called in to investigate the raja's death? This guy died because of a bull, and the raja because of a snake. Only the agent of the killing was different. Otherwise I don't see any distinction."

"Now I get it," said Choolai. "You must have been touched on the head by a toad as an infant, and your brain shriveled up. You stupid old man, everyone knows the raja died because of the *curse*! What was there to investigate? This other man, however, is different. First of all, he was an outsider. No one knows where he came from. That needs to be found out, in order to inform his folks, at the very least. Of course the police have to come."

"Fine, but I will not be blamed for his death!"

"Who's blaming you?"

"I can't name anyone specifically. Just the way they've started the investigation gives me a bad feeling," sighed Irusan.

Just then, there was a loud honk as a police jeep drove up to the field. Sub-Inspector Jeevanandham got out, along with two constables.

The sub-inspector was swinging a pair of handcuffs!

12

At the sight of the police approaching with the handcuffs, a nerve in Irusan's thigh tightened with fear.

"Where is that bloody Irusan?" demanded one of the constables. Irusan approached them, cringing.

"Snap on these cuffs," ordered the sub-inspector, handing them over.

"Aiya...I've done nothing wrong. Please aiya... I've done nothing!" Irusan's tongue was tapping Morse code on his palate.

"Yeah, sure! Get in the jeep. You have connections with Ceylonese *dadas*, do you? What a big shot!" growled the sub-inspector.

"Aiya, I swear to you, I know nothing!"

"One more word and I'll break your spine. Thousands of rupees in Ceylonese money was found in your hut. Where did it come from? The dead guy's name was Rajanayagam. Apparently he was a big gangster in Ceylon. You befriended a man who came into the country illegally, then you had a problem with him, finished him off, and blamed it on a bull. Cute!" said Sub-Inspector Jeevanandham, sneering. "What do you think, we wear flowers in our hair?"

Irusan was dragged to the police jeep and it sped off, disappearing in the cloud of dust that arose, as if a bomb had been dropped. Chellammal stood there with her mouth agape.

Choolai, too, was shaken. "Did you hear that, woman? Who would have thought the old man was capable of all that?"

"Poor Irusan," she said.

"Why feel sorry for that wretch? Pour me my kanji," he ordered, rinsing his hands in the irrigation canal.

Chellammal did so, thoughtfully. "Do you know something?" she whispered.

"What?"

"A group of doctors came around to our huts today. They gave everyone checkups and distributed medicines. They made me lie down and pressed my stomach. 'Your boy is strong,' they said. I asked how they could say it was a boy, even before he was born. They merely laughed…"

Choolai chortled. "Didn't I take you to the hospital in the city just last week? Remember, you lay down under a machine and they told you it was a boy? But you wouldn't believe…"

"Now I do. The young rani Valaiyambikai and I are going to deliver around the same time, aren't we? What do you think she will have, a girl or a boy?"

"Don't we all know? Of course she's not going to have a daughter! She will have a cursed son."

"Tsk." Chellammal screwed up her lips sadly.

"What's the point in you feeling sorry for them? That's the fate written on their heads by Brahma. Of course, if a girl child *is* born, then the younger raja will be safe. Who knows what the gods are planning?"

Just then, a van drove up and a very depressed Thillainayagam got out. Behind him was Devar, faltering toward them with his walking stick, stripes of *vibhuti* on his forehead, and a silk shawl covering his chest. His eyes were filled with grief.

The rear door of the van opened and Pandikutti's body was brought out.

Chellammal almost fainted.

"Aiyyo, what has happened to my little brother? Have you abandoned me too?" She began crying wildly, and sang, "*En raasa, vaigunda poitiye, en aiyane sivalokam poitiye...!*"

Thillainayagam looked shaken. "Choolai," he said, "go console her... She is pregnant, she shouldn't be sobbing like this. The child might be affected. What will you do then?"

Choolai was moved by Thillainayagam's concern. He ran up to hold the distressed Chellammal.

Devar approached her.

"Thayi...this never should have happened. Pandikutti was like a grandson to me. There is no one here who can compare to him. We tried our best, but Fate beat us."

Members of the Noorukudi community crowded around them. Devar got back into the van.

Just as Thillainayagam was about to climb in as well, Choolai whispered in his ear, "Aiya, the police have arrested Irusan..."

"I know! He was dealing with dadas from Ceylon without our knowledge. Can you believe it?"

The van sped off, and Pandikutti's body was carried to his hut.

Archana parked her car in front of the palace and got out.

A servant ran up. "The young raja is waiting for you."

"How did you recognize me?"

"Well, he gave a good description."

"What did he say?"

"He said you would glisten like an Amman statue."

"I see," Archana said, enjoying the compliment, as she walked down the palace corridors. "What is your name?"

"Vadivelu."

"Did you go to school?"

"Yes, I finished my B.A."

"Really?" Archana's eyebrows danced about. "A B.A.?"

Just then, a man slammed against her shoulder as he passed by.

"Stupid!" she yelled.

He paused for moment, without turning around. "I'm not the stupid one. You, who bumped into me, are stupid. You will come to realize the price of that stupidity soon," he said, and then briskly walked away.

"Who was that?" she asked Vadivelu.

"Who knows? He comes and goes as he pleases."

"Is this some kind of hotel or inn, for people to just drop in and out?" asked Archana, irritated.

Pandiammal, Visu's grandmother, was coming down the gold-plated stairway. With a look at Archana's body, sexy enough to draw any young man's eye, she said, "Vadivelu, what is this girl doing here again?"

"She's visiting the young raja."

Pandiammal's cheeks throbbed with curiosity. "Is that so?"

Fortunately, Visu chose that moment to arrive in person.

"She is an artist. I wanted to have a life-size portrait of Gajendran for my room. That's why I called her, Paatti."

Pandiammal's breath was hot. "What is your name?"

"Archana."

"You must behave here. We should not get any 'reports' about you. We follow strict discipline in this palace. So watch it!"

As Pandiammal and Vadivelu moved away, Visu turned to Archana and said, with mock formality, "Please follow me, madam!"

"I'm touched that you've called me 'madam,' Visu. I applaud the fact that you're treating me, a woman, as your equal," Archana said once Pandiammal was out of earshot, raising her hand in a mock salute.

"Sure you'll applaud...when I give you a whack. I'm really tense, here," replied Visu.

"What about me, Visu? I feel like I'm out at sea getting battered by waves. On one side, I have my dad to worry about, on the other, your curse..."

"Then how is it you sound so relaxed, Arch?"

They had arrived at Visu's room. The moment they entered, Archana shut the door, threw herself at Visu's chest, and stared up at him, unblinkingly.

"Dey...what is this all about?" enquired Visu, softly.

Archana had no words. She continued to look at him. Slowly her eyes became damp.

"Archana, what's happening? Are you crying again?"

"I'm scared, Visu," she whispered, hugging him tight.

"Scared? You?" Visu shot back, eyes wide open.

She nodded.

"I got a threatening letter, Visu. It says I'll become a widow," she said, breaking into a loud wail.

"What? What are you saying?"

"We haven't even begun unraveling the mystery, and I'm already getting threatening mails. Think of how closely they must be watching us!"

"Arch, you mean our enemies already know we're on to them?"

"I don't think so. There's no way they can suspect that we know as much as we do. I think they're threatening me so that we'll give up the idea of ever marrying."

"How would it hurt them, if we got married?"

"This samasthanam needs a puppet bride, not a woman who thinks for herself like me. Until now, they've made sure they've selected the puppets themselves. They managed to pass off their selection as god's wish, too. Oh, they're good...masterful cheats!"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember what your mother said? She's not from a royal lineage—it was Veera Nadar who made her a rani. Without him, she never would have left her 'anonymous village'... Remember?"

Visu leapt back as though he'd felt an electric shock on his forehead.

"I'm sure he's the one who'll be choosing your bride, too!" Archana went on. "What is he, anyway, a god-man or a marriage broker?"

Visu was immersed in an ocean of thoughts.

"Visu, so many of their treacherous ways have been converted into rituals here. We'll only be able to move ahead if we can open your mother's and grandmother's eyes. Without them backing us up, we won't get anywhere."

"You're right," answered Visu. "Listen, you asked me to enquire about Chellammal—Why? What's the connection between her, us, and what Pandikutti told you?"

"Plenty! Pandikutti actually started to say something about your sister-in-law, but unfortunately, he died before he could finish. He wanted his sister to leave this place. He said he wanted her son to have a long life, and if they were to stay in Kottaipuram, he would die before he turned thirty. Those were his last words."

"Arch, I can't make head or tail of what you're saying."

"I can make some sense out of it. Both Chellammal and your sister-in-law are in their eighth month of pregnancy. Chellammal is going to have a son, she knows that already. If the boy grows up here, then he'll have a short lease on life, like your brother..."

"There is no one in this world more cursed than us, Archana."

"Stop calling it a curse. If that boy is going to have a life that's only thirty years long, then he will in some way have to be made a part of your family. Otherwise the curse has no effect."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose your sister-in-law were to have a girl baby. Then Chellammal's son will take its place, here in this palace—so that he may die young."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm only guessing, Visu. There is never a girl child born in your family..."

"My god! From your guesses, maybe *I* was not really born to this family."

"No... I think a problem only crops up when a girl child is born. If it's a boy, then there's no need to switch. When your mother was pregnant with you, there was no way of knowing the gender of the child. Things are different now. You can do a scan to find out. Now I think they know, they plan ahead..."

"You're right, of course. It's not as if a girl child was never born in this palace. It's just that they died a few days later—or, perhaps, they were murdered. So now you think they're planning to switch the babies, instead of killing, huh?"

"When one heir is gone, another should be instated immediately. They can't wait until you get married and have a child. Therefore, they want to instate your brother's child as the next heir. That's your enemies' only ruse. Until the child grows into an adult, they'll hold the reins of the samasthanam. Because they're the ones who choose the ranis, they have control over them as well..."

"So you think my mother and grandmother are in on all this?"

"What kind of idiotic question is that? No mother would play by such cruel rules. That's why your enemies use the cloak of the curse. No, I don't think your mother or grandmother have any clue."

Visu relaxed a bit. The storm clouds in his mind seemed to move a bit to let in some light. But a new doubt arose, too.

"Arch, what does it matter if it's a boy or a girl, if they're going to kill the child before it's thirty anyway? Why do you think they are extra careful not to allow any girl children to survive?"

"If it were a girl, there would be problems. No girl can be kept unmarried until thirty. She would marry into a different family, from a different samasthanam; then your enemies would have to deal with the groom, too. Maybe that's why the girl children are put to death at birth. They've invented a story to cover their plot, about a girl child destined to survive, who will be the only one who can open that mysterious bamboo box that holds the solution."

"But didn't you say the only way they can succeed is if they control all the heirs? Now I'm the last one left—what's the hold they have on me?"

"Will you marry the girl of their choice?"

"Never!"

"Will the girl you choose believe all these stories? The only reason you follow all these crazy traditions is because you're scared of death. If you make it to thirty, you can turn around and say you don't believe in it all. But they're going to finish you off before you get there. Then, until your son becomes an adult, they can rule with a free hand."

"It's all becoming clearer. How did you figure out so much, so quickly?"

"Thanks to Pandikutti. If he hadn't mentioned Chellammal, I would still be tearing my hair. The gods must want us live a long and happy life together, that's why we've been able to unearth so much..."

"Of course, we're blessed! And yet...who are these enemies, among all the people in this palace?"

"Just answer my questions. Then I'll tell you who your enemies are."

"Go ahead, ask!"

"Who is this Devar?"

There was a loud rap on the door. Visu rose and cautiously turned the ivory knob.

There stood Devar.

13

Visu was shaken. Devar had never before sought him in his room. Archana could feel the shock waves emanating from Visu.

"May I enter, oh Maharaja?"

Visu silently nodded. He entered, throwing a mild smile at Archana. She rose, in respect. Acknowledging her gesture, he said softly, "Please, be seated."

Visu stood near her.

"I know who this girl is. Karwar Karunakaran told me all about her. I believe you two have been in love for several years?"

The couple remained silent.

"I am not against love," Devar continued. "Even I was young once, and got swept up by such things. So I respect your feelings. It also relieves me of the responsibility of finding the raja a bride. However..."

What was behind this pregnant pause? Archana gave Devar a piercing look.

"However?" she prompted.

"Well, there is just one small matter. You are aware of the curse on this family, are you not?"

"Yes, I am."

"And still you want to marry this young raja?"

"That's the power of love."

Devar seemed to appreciate the straightforwardness of her answer.

"I am very happy. I shall get you two married. Until now, the rajas of this palace have wedded only the women who have been officially approved for them. That did not stop them from chasing after other men's wives. Yet, until you, Visu, none of them ever wanted to marry for love. So just for that reason—no matter what opposition you may face—I will make sure the two of you are together. I promise you.

"But we have to be very secretive. The maharani should not know yet. I hear she has selected a girl for you, a distant relative of hers, with Veera Nadar's help," he said, and turned to leave.

Visu looked at him gratefully. Devar paused at the door.

"Thambi, may the moment this girl becomes your wife be very auspicious; may it augur a long life for you. My eyes are tired of seeing so many deaths. I pray that you, at least, will survive to a ripe old age. I tried so hard to protect your brother, but I failed. I want to make sure you are safe. I need you to trust me, and do a few things that I ask of you. Will you?"

Both Visu and Archana could only stare in surprise at Devar's emotional state.

"Any kind of sin can be washed away, except when a chaste woman's honour has been scorned. A taint like that can never be erased. Several of your ancestors committed that sin, repeatedly. The manner in which Vanjiammal was dishonoured cannot be described in words. You, my dear, are a woman. You are better equipped to understand that pain than I.

"Were you to hear Vanjiammal's story, you would weep. In her death, she has become a goddess. You should plead with *her* to keep your thali,

that sacred thread of marriage, forever. No woman who has married into the palace has ever appealed to her before the marriage, though they have prayed to her afterwards. I did not tell them to. But I want you to do it; I have an intuition that she will bless your thali."

Archana gently nudged Visu aside and approached Devar eagerly.

"Aiya, who is this Vanjiammal? Will you tell me the story?"

"It is a very sad tale. I do not know all the details. Go and meet Vishnuchittan. He is even older than me, and a very dear friend. He is an expert in folklore, and composes wonderful songs as well. Only because he was born as a Noorukudi has he had to stay hidden from the rest of the world."

"Where can I find him?"

"He will be in one of huts in the coconut grove. Go and meet him." Devar left, with a weary expression on his face.

Visu turned to Archana and asked, "You wanted to know who Devar was. Did you get your answer?"

"Now I know what *kind* of a man he is. But I still don't know *who* he is."

"I don't, really, either. He's been here in the palace since my great-grandfather's time. According to my grandmother, he would be the first one to sacrifice his life for this family. Besides that, I hardly know anything about him."

"That's not important now, Visu. In the beginning, based on the clues we had, I suspected Devar. Now, after talking with him, my suspicions have been wiped away. Let's go meet Vishnuchittan."

"And Chellammal?"

"We'll meet her too."

In a few minutes, Visu was ready, with a camera stylishly slung over his shoulder.

A cool breeze brushed past the two of them. A red-beaked parrot, which had been pecking at the spathe of a palm tree, flew up into the sky.

"I have never come to this part of the town, Archana."

One of Noorukudi men, who had gone up a palm tree to fetch his toddy pot, slid down the tree as fast as someone falling out of a plane, ran up to Visu, and bent his body into eight subservient folds.

"Namaskaram, oh Raja! And to you too, madam," he cried, and hurried off towards the huts.

"We're done for," said Visu. "Now this chap will fetch everybody and make a big song and dance out of us coming here."

Visu was not off the mark. Soon everyone in the whole community ran out of their huts and welcomed the two with great fanfare, beating *thaarai* and *thappattai* drums.

"Oh Raja, please grace my hut," said one of the Noorukudi women. "I have honey and millet balls ready for you."

"The rains have been cheating us," said another. "Now that the raja has graced us with his presence, let us hope it pours!"

More such words followed. As if acknowledging the warmth of the welcome, lightning streaked across the sky as though it were building a wedding tent over them, and dark clouds converged. Roars of thunder rolled across the groves.

"Arch, it looks as if we're going to be caught in a downpour," Visu whispered, and pulled her into the closest hut.

"Please come in, Raja. Have a seat!" It was Choolai, though Visu did not recognize him. "I see you don't know me. I am Choolai, Thillainayagam's trusted servant."

"Of course!"

"This is my wife, Chellammal."

Chellammal, who was churning butter in a clay pot, put aside the pot and got to her feet, with some difficulty, bracing her pregnant frame.

Archana felt an electric charge run through her nerves.

It was raining harder. Droplets of water began squirming their way through the tiny holes in the thatched roof.

"I am sorry it's pouring so much," Choolai said miserably, as if he were personally responsible for the weather. "I should get you something warm to drink." He ran out before Archana could stop him.

Chellammal stood staring at the two of them. Archana wondered if she should tell her about Pandikutti's last words. Deciding that it was not an opportune moment, she looked at Chellammal tenderly.

"I was the one who admitted your brother, Pandikutti, to the hospital. I am so sorry he could not be saved. He had something he wanted me to say to you; I will tell you soon," she said.

"What? What did he say?"

"Now is not the time for it," Archana replied, looking around cautiously. Dampness was seeping through the mud walls of the hut. "Do you know where I can find Vishnuchittan?"

"Who? You mean Crazy Thatha?"

"Is that what you call him?"

"Yes. That old man's always either sitting in some corner singing or shouting curses."

"Why?"

"Who knows? He's harmless, though. He's always been there for us. He has no home of his own; we all take turns to feed him. My grandfather used to say it's only because of that old man that we're living with dignity."

"He has no family?"

"He does—but they've become quite rich, now."

"You mean there's a class distinction even within your community?"

"Yes, and it's increasing now. Many of our people are getting educated. When they find employment away from the samasthanam, their status automatically grows."

"Are there many educated people here?"

"Crazy Thatha's children are very well educated."

Choolai came back, his head covered with an old wet sackcloth. He was followed by an old man who stood outside.

"Come, Vishnuchittan," said Choolai.

Chellammal rose up, a joyful smile on her face. "There, the old man you wanted to meet is here himself," she cried.

Droplets fell from the long gray beard. The wrinkled, creased face glared at them.

The hut was becoming very dark. Chellammal lit a tiny lantern.

"Raja, I went to buy some palm sugar for you. On the way I met Crazy Thatha, who wanted to see you in my hut. So I brought him along."

"Are you really Viswanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan?" demanded Vishnuchittan, mockingly. "How come you have decided to dirty your feet in our humble huts? I thought you folks slept on silken beds and ate from golden plates. Or did you come to check if you could find a fresh woman here? And who's this young thing with you, this silken rose?"

The veins in Visu's forehead throbbed with anger at the affront, and he opened his mouth to retaliate. Archana pressed down his shoulder and whispered, "Don't, Visu. This old man is the only clue to your family's secrets. We cannot antagonize him!

"We don't mind, Thatha. Curse more, if you want to," she said encouragingly to the old man.

"What? You want me to curse more?"

"Yes, Thatha. Every word you want to say, say it out loud. After all, you have every right to be angry. We, your oppressors, have to listen and take it."

"Hmph! I will not. I refuse to say another word!" cried Vishnuchittan. "If I do, then you'll chop out my tongue... I'll meet the same fate as Nanduvadakaan. You'll make me carry my severed tongue on a betel leaf in a procession around the town. No, I'll not say another word. I will not!"

Yelling at the top of his voice, Crazy Thatha stumbled out into the rain.

14

Visu and Archana were more stunned than hurt by Vishnuchittan's outburst and his maniacal running.

"Where is the old man going?"

"Forget him, madam. He's a very good man, but sometimes a screw gets loose and he goes off ranting like this. There are a couple such cranks

in our community. You should meet Irusan, too. He's presently in prison for murder."

Choolai's words gave Visu a shock.

"What are you saying, Choolai?"

"Yes, Raja. The police arrested him this morning. They are saying he drove the cows to gore a man to death—"

"I told the police that it was an accident, and not to make a big deal out of it!"

"I have no idea, Raja. Some in our community were hurt that you had him arrested. They believe Irusan would never intentionally harm anyone. He just wags his tongue too much."

Visu wrung his hands, despairing over this turn of events.

It had stopped raining.

"Shall we leave?" asked Archana.

Chellammal had made ginger tea for them. Archana accepted it with a smile and drank hers in one gulp. Visu took his cup halfheartedly.

"Drink up," said Archana, teasing him for his discomfort. A crowd of Noorukudi was gathering in front of the hut, gazing in amazement at their young raja sipping the humble tea, honoured by his presence.

Archana approached Chellammal with her empty glass, and said, "When I send word for you, make sure you come."

Chellammal nodded.

As Visu and Archana left the hut, the crowd parted to make way. Archana hitched her sari higher. With her stiletto heels, it was difficult to walk through the slushy wet ground.

As they proceeded down the path, they spied Vishnuchittan standing under a tree, grinning at them as if nothing had happened earlier. Visu took out his camera and clicked.

"Thatha, are you still angry with us?" asked Archana.

"Why would I be angry with you?" he replied softly.

"Then can we chat with you for a bit? Think of me as your granddaughter."

"But you are so much younger than my granddaughter. She has two kids your age."

"My god! Don't tell me that you are a great-grandfather!"

"I am," he guffawed, opening his toothless mouth with a trace of friendship.

"Shall we go for a stroll?" she asked, steering him towards the green fields.

"Who are you?" asked the old man. "What is your name?"

"Archana. I am going to marry your raja, here!"

"Marry him?" Vishnuchittan shot Visu a disapproving look.

"Why, anything the matter with him?"

"They are all cursed by Vanjiammal! You must forget him!"

"Tell me about this Vanjiammal."

"You have heard of Kannagi?"

"The honourable woman from *Silapathikaram*? The epic?"

"That's the one. Vanjiammal is a reincarnation of her!"

"Thatha, I want to know everything about her. Will you tell me, please?"

"Her story is not a simple one, nor shallow. Even talking about her thrills my tongue."

"Devar said you could tell us the story."

"Oh, that young fellow, eh? Then of course I'll tell you."

They passed a massive banyan tree, under which was a termite mound, reverently smeared with turmeric and kumkum.

"How old do you think this snake burrow is?" asked Vishnuchittan, pointing at it.

"No idea," Archana said.

"This year, in the month of Aippasi, it will be a hundred years old. The snake that lives inside it is even older. It is the only living thing, besides Devar and myself, that has seen Vanjiammal."

"No one else?"

"Not that I know of..."

A cool breeze rose from the lush green fields. Peace and harmony seemed to envelop them.

"Do you see that mud path?" asked Vishnuchittan. "The raja in those days, Vengai Rajan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan, used to ride down that path. I must have been around six or seven then. All I had to clothe myself with was a loincloth. In fact, that was the only clothing I could

afford for the next thirty years! I worked as a palanquin bearer. The raja would go everywhere on his horse; only the rani and the children used the palanquin…"

In Vishnuchittan's mind, he had already become a child again, walking down the winding road of memory. Limbs like matchsticks, a tiny physique, messy hair, bright eyes, a sunken stomach; he wore only a torn sari pallu as a loincloth.

"Hurry up, run!" called his mother. "The rani and her children are getting ready to visit the temple. It's your turn to carry the palanquin. If you're late, they'll torture you, and your father too! Hurry up, my dear."

The young lad set off, happily swinging his dried stingray tail. His mother called out to him again.

"Hey Vishnu!"

"Yes, Amma?"

"Bring me some kumkum from the Amman temple!"

The colt-like legs sprinted down the mud lane. The path was lit by huge neem-oil lamps mounted on tall stone pillars. Dharmanattan was there, moving from lamp to lamp with a small ladder and a pot of oil, refilling them.

He called out to the running Vishnuchittan. "Hey, squirt, you're late for your palanquin duty. Run! If you keep the rani waiting any longer, they'll skin your back and salt it!"

Vishnuchittan's feet gathered speed. Still, it was no use. A group of palanquin bearers, chanting "Heyya! Heyya!" in chorus, was already coming down the path, carrying the royals.

Muthurangam, one of the bearers, threw a hard look at Vishnuchittan. Scared, he ran behind them to the temple, where the priest waited with his small urumi drum, ready to begin the puja. He gave a drum roll as they neared the temple.

Suddenly, the sound was drowned out by galloping hooves. Five horses came racing in. The king, Vengai Rajan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan, sat on one of the horses. He was accompanied by the British collector, with his white skin and stringy, pumpkin-coloured hair, and several servants.

"*Aley*, a white *durai!*"

"He is the Collector of Thirunelveli."

"He is a close friend of our raja."

"Welcome, Raja! Welcome, Rani! Welcome, young Princes! Welcome, Durai!"

The crowd of Noorukudi enthusiastically called out their loyalty. In their midst was a beauty, who shone brighter than a flame, yet was unaware of her attractiveness.

The raja, talking with his white friend, happened to turn his head and catch a glimpse of that flash of lightning among the pressing mob. When he spied those ample breasts straining against the blouseless sari pallu, an electric current surged through the raja's body.

The white man's eyes, too, feasted on the woman.

"Who is she?" mouthed the raja to his karwar, Sivakozhundhu.

"She is Vanjiammal, born to a woman who suddenly went into fits right in the garbagraham on the day of our Goddess's birth star. Normally, the child comes out of the womb headfirst, but Vanjiammal came out with her legs first. That is a rare birth."

The raja slowly fingered his jaw. Aware of his lewd thoughts, the priest, the village headman, and the rani, Rathnavathi, shared a look.

He must not come here to worship and start eyeing women in the Goddess's presence! chided the priest, silently.

Rathnavathi's eyes were clouding up. *Aatha, Divine Mother, please ignore my husband's lecherous mind*, she pleaded.

The priest drummed again. The people froze in ardent devotion.

Vanjiammal stood with her palms folded together, straining her neck for a good look at the goddess.

As the camphor flames rose to the ceiling of the garbagraham, the raja and the white man had their gaze fixed on Vanjiammal. She, of course, had no idea; her own gaze was fixed on her goddess.

Suddenly, she felt a touch on her shoulder.

"Who's that?" she said, startled, turning around. It was Nanduvadakaan. He signaled for Vanjiammal to move out of the milling crowd. She refused at first, then moved towards him.

"What?"

"Shh… I had to tell you that I'm off to Thirunelveli…"

"Are you really going out of the boundary of the samasthanam? What will you do if they catch you?"

"I don't care. I'll say I am going to worship at the Chathuragiri Mahalingam Temple in the hills."

"But why go at all?"

"Vanji, the entire nation is burning with a hunger for freedom! Here we are, stuck carrying these royal folks' burden. Truly, we're no better than frogs trapped in a well!"

"You scare me. If the palace folks get to know of your plans, they'll kill you!"

"I told you, I don't care! I'm off. Take care of my father and my poor deaf mother…" He turned around and walked away, his feet gathering more speed with each step. The temple drums gave his walk a rhythm. Vanjiammal stared after him, distressed, and then turned back to the puja.

Finally, the *mela* ended. The rani got into her palanquin, and the princes into theirs, as the mob made a rush for the free oat kanji.

The raja got on his horse. His general led the entourage out. The raja's eyes were still searching for Vanjiammal. She was standing next to the sacrificial stone, her eyes shut, praying for Nanduvadakaan.

The raja turned to his karwar and whispered, "Durai and I want that woman tonight. Make arrangements!"

"Raja, that won't be easy…" said Sivakozhundhu.

"'"Why?" he asked furiously.

"Raja—tomorrow, your stableman Kuzhandhaisami's daughter is getting married. This afternoon she will come to your palace for your royal gift of blessing, your *prasadham*. One day, *this* woman will also come to you for your blessing, before her marriage. Can't you wait till then?"

Karwar's smooth talking did not help cool Kottaipurathaan's passion. "I don't care what garbage is coming for my blessing," he said. "I am the raja. Just make the arrangements!"

"No Raja—Kuzhandhaisami's daughter Thangammal is really a nice plump girl. She came of age just last month. The raja's touch will make her complete!"

Somewhat appeased, the raja kicked his horse. It twisted its tail and sped off. The rest followed.

At a signal from the rani, the bearers of the palanquin set it down, and one of them went to her.

Rathnavathi moved the curtain aside and asked softly, "Who is that woman?"

"Vanjiammal," answered the bearer.

"Tell me about her."

"She is an orphan. All the Noorukudi think of her as a special woman. Vibhuti from her hand can cure even the cruelest disease. Pandikarrupar is bringing her up as his granddaughter."

"I've never heard of this woman before!"

"She is normally a very private person. I hear she is in love with Nanduvadakaan."

"Who is Nanduvadakaan?"

"He is the one who tamed the bull and won the gold chain prize in the *jallikattu* at the last Pongal festival."

"Tell both him and Pandikarrupar to come and see me."

"Of course, Rani. There is one more important thing you should know..."

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow, the daughter of Kuzhandhaisami, the stableman, is getting married. She will be coming to the palace to receive her royal blessing."

Rathnavathi's eyes gathered immediate tears. Her chest rose and fell in deep sorrow. Just then there was a sound of racing footsteps.

It was Vishnuchittan running towards her, sending a storm of dust up around him, chased by the royal Rajapalayam dogs.

"Aiyyo...what happened to you then?" asked Archana, cupping her chin in concern.

Only then did Vishnuchittan realize that he had been relating his life story. Visu sat next to them, mute as a pot immersed in a well.

"What happened to me? The dogs were hungry for flesh... They wanted a kill!"

The bared jaws of the dogs were visible in the light of the neem-oil lamps.

"Who is that being chased?" asked the rani, in shock.

"I don't know. I think it is one of the lads employed as a palanquin bearer..."

By then, Vishnuchittan had reached the palanquin. He threw himself on the ground and cried, "Rani...please save me...the dogs...the dogs!" He cringed in fear.

The dogs froze at a look from the rani.

"Who are you?" she asked, with a smile.

"He is Vishnuchittan, Rani. Today it was his turn to bear the young raja's palanquin."

She turned around to look at the smaller palanquin in which her children rode. A group of children, from about five to fifteen years old, were breathlessly battling to hold it aloft.

Rathnavathi's heart pinched in pain. "Whose order is it that children this age should bear the palanquin?" she demanded.

"Thandavan, the rajas' right-hand man. He thinks that if we train them this young, they will remain loyal to us for life. Therefore, he has set a rota for all the Noorukudi children to take turns bearing the palanquin. This kid was late today. I think Thandavan is just trying to give the squirt a scare with the dogs..."

"Yes Rani," said Vishnuchittan with a heaving sob. "'Why were you late?' he yelled, and he wouldn't give me any kanji. I got mad because I was hungry. So he sicced the dogs on me."

Rathnavathi got down from her palanquin. "From this moment, neither I nor my children will ever get into another palanquin. Tell that Thandavan to come and meet me!" she declared. Then, taking a bunch

of bananas from the palanquin, she gave them to Vishnuchittan, who accepted them with a grin.

The rani began walking with her children.

"Please, oh Rani... Do not walk! If the raja comes to know, he will murder us!" begged the bearers. But she paid no heed.

The rani had almost replaced the goddess in Vishnuchittan's eyes. The rest of the Noorukudi watched the marching royal family as if they were the eighth wonder of the world. The news quickly travelled to the palace.

There, the raja and the white man were sipping dark blue liquor from their goblets.

"It's so damn hot!" sighed the white man, his voice a snake-like hiss. "Your samasthanam and the rituals of the Noorukudi are so different from anything I've ever seen before. Their songs and dances are simply fabulous. And oh, the women! They're like works of art, I say! They're your slaves, aren't they? Why aren't any of those statuesque beauties here in your harem?"

The raja bent his head. Rathnavathi's stern face flashed before his eyes for a second.

He thought back to how he had married this woman, so far above his own status—the Princess of Malairajapuram—and the huge dowry she had come with, and how he had then submitted himself totally to her discipline. He felt a heavy regret.

There was a loud sound from outside the palace. It was a band, accompanying Kuzhandhaisami and his wife, bearing plates of betel leaves and fruits. The raja called them in.

They entered, set the plates at his feet, and fell to the floor. Pride shone on the raja's face as he received these obeisances.

He turned, arrogantly, to the white man. The man's cat-eyes gazed back, puzzled.

"Salutations, oh Raja!" Kuzhandhaisami began. "I have fixed my daughter's marriage. Your gardener, Vajravelu, is the groom. You must attend the wedding, along with your family, and give your blessing. But before that, you must settle your royal eyes on my daughter and give her your prasadham!" As Kuzhandhaisami finished his speech, bamboo

drums broke loose. A dancer shook the bells on his feet and danced to the rhythm. The white durai watched everything, amazed.

Then entered Vengai Rajan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan's younger twin brother, Simma Rajan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan, carrying his muzzle loader. Behind him were two servants carrying two deer carcasses tied to a pole.

The white man's cat-eyes were now wide.

The younger brother turned to Kuzhandhaisami and demanded loftily, "What is all this?"

"I bow down to you, oh Younger Raja. I have come to invite you for my daughter's wedding."

"You can invite me, yes, but what about the prasadham?"

"Oh that too, Raja… We will send her over this afternoon."

"Thatha, can you explain to me what this prasadham is?" Archana cut into Vishnuchittan's reminisces.

"It is no prasadham. It's leftovers. These rajas, arrogant with power, contrived this as a ritual. They are the first to take the virginity of any girl of our community who is to be wedded. Only after that can even her own husband touch her." Vishnuchittan flicked tears away from his eyes.

"But that's horrible!" exclaimed Archana.

Visu sat dumbstruck.

"What happened then?" she asked.

"Archana…" Visu broke in hesistantly. "The people in the palace will be going crazy with worry. It's getting late. What do we do?"

"Visu, we are listening to a *most* interesting story. Let them search for you. You have to stay here."

"Archana, why don't you listen to the story, and tell me later?" he said as he noticed a trail of electric torchlights moving down the lane. "They are already here searching for me. Look!"

A bulb lit in Archana's mind. "Okay Visu, you go ahead. Don't let anyone know that we are trying to learn Vanjiammal's story. I need to find out more."

Visu got up immediately and walked towards the trail of torchlights.

At its head he was met by the karwar, who almost wept in relief. "How could you do this, Thambi? You know we worry about you. One of the Noorukudi told me you came this way, and I came running. What would we do if something were to happen to you?"

"Stop fretting, Karwar. I was restless, so I came to the fields for a stroll." Visu turned and led them back towards the palace.

At the palace gates, Divyamangalam and Pandiammal ran up to Visu and hugged him.

"And just where did you disappear to?"

"Why go for a stroll now?"

"As if you don't have enough breeze in this palace! You step out once more and you'll see! Where is that woman?"

"I have no clue."

"What? Wasn't she was with you?"

"She was. I don't know where she is now."

"So she's courageous enough to venture off on her own, is she?"

Devar, who was standing nearby with Thillainayagam, had a reply ready for Pandiammal's catty query. "Maharani, these are days when women are venturing off on trips to the moon. I don't think she's done anything wrong. Raja, please go and rest in your room."

Visu quietly slipped away.

"Devar, I don't like his attitude. Gajendran was totally under my control, and still I was unable to save him. How am I to save Visu?" asked Divyamangalam.

"Please Rani, stop worrying. We are here."

"You were *all* here. And still I lost Gajendran!"

"Let's forget about the lives we lost. I give you my word: I shall save this young raja's life even if it costs me my own… I swear it!"

"Your word is our only comfort. Tell me… I hear that Irusan has been arrested because someone was gored to death by a bull. Is it true?"

"He has only been taken in for questioning—not arrested. I'll get him out."

Devar turned to Thillainayagam with a loaded look. Thillainayagam understood and left the palace. Outside, he learned that Irusan was already out on bail.

Thillainayagam was puzzled. *Who in this region has the money or power to get him out on bail?* he wondered, and rushed to Irusan's hut.

Inside the hut, Irusan was lying on his cot. Seeing Thillainayagam, he sprang up and fell at his feet.

"Hey, Irusan, what happened?"

"Aande, thanks to you, I am out. The police tried to break my knees! Thankfully, the man you sent got me released. I believe Devar also spoke to the inspector on the phone. Only your name and Devar's shut the inspector up."

"*I* sent someone to pull you out?" Thillainayagam asked, surprised.

"Well, that's what the man said."

"Was it one of the Noorukudi?"

"No, no... I had never seen him before."

"Where is he now?"

"Who knows?"

Archana looked beautiful in the glow of Vishnuchittan's tiny lamp. She sat elegantly, eyes bright and eager, with a stubborn belief that the secret of Visu's life was hidden somewhere in the story of Vanjiammal—the story which Vishnuchittan now resumed.

"Kuzhandhaisami sent his daughter Thangammal to receive the royal blessing. She was very young, and went fearfully. Inside the palace there was a war going on between the two brothers."

"War? Between brothers?"

"Why not, when there is a beautiful woman at stake?"

"I don't understand."

"Vengai Rajan wanted to be the one to deflower Thangammal, and then give his white friend a turn. But his younger brother said, 'No way, I want this woman. You can have the next.' "

"So what happened?"

"Simma Rajan picked up his muzzle loader. Everyone thought that he was merely bluffing, but, no: he actually pulled the trigger. The shot traveled towards the raja at breakneck speed…"

"*Aiyaiyyo*, all out, eh?"

Vishnuchittan gave a secret smile.

"Hold on. There's something you should know, before I tell you what happened to him. Remember: Vanjiammal was a rare woman, blessed by the goddess. Anyone who cast a wrong look at her would have something terrible happen to him, that very same day!"

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The shot sped towards Vengai Rajan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan and plunged into his knee before he could move out of the way.

Though there was no threat to his life, there was a scare that his leg might have to be amputated. The entire palace was shaken.

As Vengai Rajan was having his knee cut open by the doctor's searing-hot knife, he yelled out in spite of his pain: "He's no longer my brother! He must not be left alive…not anymore! I want his head on a plate!"

In the next room, Thangammal was being readied by the maids to receive her prasadham. She came out to find Vengai Rajan still ranting with pain, and Rathnavathi in tears.

Thandavan, the rajas' right-hand man, stood wringing his hands. "Oh Rani…!"

Hearing Thandavan's voice, Rathnavathi wiped her tears and looked up.

"It does not bode well to see the royal brothers hurt each other like this," said Thandavan. "They could end up killing each other. This could be their ruin, and that of the whole samasthanam. But there is another reason that our raja was hurt today…"

"What is that?"

"There is a Noorukudi woman, named Vanjiammal."

Rathnavathi grew apprehensive.

"She is the Goddess's own child," Thandavan went on. "She emerged at birth with her feet first. On her soles were the signs of the *sankha* and the *chakra*."

"And that is special?"

"Of course! It is believed that the Goddess lives in people who are born this way. They can cure any disease. Their hands and face are considered lucky. If we give them due respect, our lives will be comfortable; but if we have as much as a single bad thought about them, it can bring disaster upon us."

"I can't believe this, Thandavan!"

"It's true, Rani. This Vanjiammal was there in the temple this evening. Our raja lusted for her. For even thinking of it, he had to pay with his leg! If he proceeds to act on this, no one can say what will befall your family. The pride, respect, and dignity that this samasthanam has enjoyed will go to ruin. It is only you who can advise him."

Thandavan left the room. Rathnavathi's face looked as if he had just cut off her arm.

Just then, she heard a crash. She looked over to see a fallen plate and fruits rolling all over the floor. Next to it stood Vishnuchittan, in his loincloth, with a scared look on his face.

"You...what are you doing here?"

"Hungry..."

The word seemed to strike the center of Rathnavathi's forehead.

"Pick up those fruits. Actually, sit down here and eat them."

Vishnuchittan bit into one, splattering juice over the floor.

"They're so g-good..." he stuttered.

Just then, the rani's two sons entered the room, and threw Vishnuchittan a disgusted look.

"Amma," demanded the elder son, Indran, "Why is this beggar here, in your room?"

"Send him out," said the younger son, Chandran. "*Dad* will be mad at you."

Rathnavathi couldn't help but smile at her younger son's use of the English word. Hearing a groan from the raja's bedroom, she moved there.

The two sons cornered Vishnuchittan.

"Dey! Throw up everything you just ate!"

Indran snapped his fingers and demanded immediate obedience, in a tone that seemed unnatural coming from an eight-year-old child. He sounded like a full-grown lord, ready to wring Vishnuchittan's neck. Chandran was already digging a finger into Vishnu's mouth, trying to make him gag.

"*Uweuggh…!*"

Even now, the elderly Vishnuchittan's face reflected the shame he had felt at such a young age.

Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, a large branch fell from the tree above them, knocked Vishnuchittan on his head, and left him unconscious.

Archana was stunned. She could not make out anything clearly in the darkness. She could see no probable reason for the branch to have fallen. There wasn't even a heavy breeze. *How did this happen?* she wondered.

Vishnuchittan groaned in pain. She bent down and tried to move the branch off of him. Finding it too heavy, she yelled at the top of her lungs: "*Help…help!*"

Some yards away, she could make out a few hurricane lanterns moving in the dark fields; there were still some men at work. They heard her call but didn't understand the English at first. Finally, recognizing the urgency in her tone, they came rushing over and saw Vishnuchittan.

"Dey, let's carry him to the hut over there," cried one, and the others helped him.

Vishnuchittan screamed aloud. It was clear that a few bones were broken.

"Madam…" Archana heard a voice call out from the darkness. It was Visu's young servant, Vadivelu. "The raja wants you to return immediately."

The men made way for her to follow Vadivelu.

"Where is Visu?"

"In his private chamber." Saying this, he began leading her down a different path.

"Hey, this is not the way to the palace! Why are you taking me this way?"

"So that no one will see you enter, madam. As it is, there was a commotion because the raja went out with you. If his enemies see you enter his room, they won't wait till he turns thirty. They'll off him right now!"

"What are you saying?"

"The truth, madam! It's only because of the young raja that I have this job. When I was roaming around Madurai, unable to find work even though I had a degree, he brought me back here and gave me a steady income. I know it wasn't easy for him to keep me employed in the palace. He might be the raja, but the power and authority lie elsewhere..."

When they got to his room, Visu was sitting dejectedly on the sofa. Seeing Archana, he rose. Vadivelu began to leave deferentially, but Visu stopped him.

"Vadivelu, ask Karwar Karunakaran to come meet me. Make sure he doesn't tell anyone about me and Archana."

Vadivelu nodded and left the room. Visu latched the door and turned to Archana.

"Arch, I was really worried about you. Did you get all the information from Vishnuchittan?"

Archana shook her head in disappointment. It was an act of beauty; her pallu fell off her shoulder and Visu's gaze swooped down to her chest like a jet landing on a runway. Archana followed his look and adjusted her sari.

"I can't even let it slip a bit, eh?" she giggled.

"Tell me what happened!"

"A branch broke off the tree, Visu..."

"What? I have no time for riddles, Archana. What happened?"

Understanding Visu's irritation, she narrated the entire episode up until the falling of the branch.

"So you found out nothing?"

"Oh, I found out plenty."

"What?"

"These murders are revenge for an ancient wrong."

"Whose vengeance, and on whom? For so many generations?"

"Years ago, your ancestors violated the honour of the Noorukudi community. Now they are taking their vengeance on you!"

"So my enemy is one of the Noorukudi?"

"Of course!"

"Who is it?"

"Well, the branch broke just as I was about to figure that out."

"Vishnuchittan is okay?"

"He's alive..."

"So we can solve the puzzle later."

"Besides that—we have to find out what is in that bamboo box."

Loud clangs of cymbals came from outside. Visu peeked out of the window. There were flaming torches, and on one man's head, a giant basket covered with a yellow cloth. Archana looked out too.

"What is it, Visu?"

"They are starting their festival."

"What festival?"

"A festival for Vengai Ponni Amman. They will conduct a fair, with many sporting contests for the brave men. But before that, they will do a ritual show of respect for us, which we have to return."

The crowd had reached the palace footsteps, continuing to dance to the loud music. A servant knocked on the door.

"The maharani wants you," he said.

"Let's go." Visu took Archana along.

The entire royal family was gathered at the entrance of the palace. Archana saw Valaiyambikai for the first time.

"Who is she?"

"My sister-in-law."

One of the Noorukudi stepped forward, crowned Visu with a silk turban, slashed his own finger with a knife, placed a blood *thilak* on his forehead, and called out, "May the royal family thrive for years, so that we of the Noorukudi community may also survive in wealth and health! You must grace our fifty-day festival, oh Raja!"

In the crowd was Irusan, slightly drunk.

One of the mob stepped up with a flower garland, ready to put it around Visu's neck. Woven into the strands of flowers was a cobra…

Just as the serpent was about to land on Visu's neck, Valaiyambikai fell to the ground, screaming.

As everyone else's attention was pinned on the fainted Valaiyambikai, Archana, in a flash of intelligence, pulled Visu back.

"Please do not be afraid," said the man. "This is a sacred snake."

"Devar!" cried Divyamangalam, holding Valaiyambikai on her lap, "tell him to get out. How could you allow for this, knowing Visu's precarious position?"

"What do you mean, Rani?" replied Devar. "This is Madhan; you know that he is a specialist in catching snakes. All his snakes have had their venom removed. You know that, too."

Only then did Archana breathe freely. She stood close to Visu.

"All right, you may go now," Thillainayagam called out to the gathered crowd. "Of course the royal family will join in the celebration."

The crowd began singing and dancing once again, and slowly moved out of the palace grounds. Madhan stayed behind with his snakes.

"Madhan, why haven't you left?" asked Devar.

"I needed to speak to you alone, sir…"

"What is it?"

"You promised me fifty thousand rupees. I'd prefer it if you could give it to me in Ceylonese currency."

Visu and Archana gaped at him.

Devar explained. "Raja, I was told that the palace grounds were infested with snakes. Madhan is an expert in catching them. However, he has been eager to return to Ceylon. I promised him fifty thousand if he would stay here until the snakes were all caught. But even our best efforts were not enough to save your brother."

"Yes Raja, even on the day your brother died I caught two snakes," said Madhan. "I asked Thillainayagam to give me my money, because I wanted to leave for Ceylon with my friend Rajanayagam. Tragically,

Rajanayagam died the next day, after he was gored by that bull. I was staying in Irusan's hut; Rajanayagam had left his bag with me, in which he had some Ceylonese currency for our trip. The police arrested Irusan because they found my friend's money. Thankfully, Irusan was released on bail. Raja, I would appreciate it if you could get the charges against him dropped and pay me what is due me. I have caught eight snakes so far."

Thillainayagam walked up. "Hey, why haven't you gone yet? Get lost! Your money will come to you," he said to Madhan. Then he turned to Visu. "Raja, the maharani wants you."

The accountant who was accompanying Thillainayagam chided Madhan. "Fifty thousand to catch snakes! That's daylight robbery, man! And even while the raja's body was lying here, you kept demanding your money! What's your hurry?"

So this was voice on the phone? was the question in both Visu and Archana's minds.

"Go to your room," Pandiammal told Visu, "and stay there." Turning to Archana, she said, "Thillainayagam has a room ready for you, too." Just then, a brawny man with a mole on his back and a green belt around his waist came and whispered something in Pandiammal's ear.

This is the man who was eavesdropping near Visu's room! cried a bird in Archana's brain.

"Visu," she called out.

Visu turned back, fresh fear writ on his face. "Yes, Archana?"

"He is the one who was eavesdropping on us…" she said.

Just as Visu was ready to pounce on him ferociously, Pandiammal intervened.

"What are you mad about Visu? I told him to keep an eye on you two. You were alone with a strange woman in your room. Who knows what could have happened? Were we supposed to stand by doing nothing?"

All the clues Archana had connected, the whole plot she had constructed, was now falling apart. Visu was going to start believing in the curse once again.

Run! As far as you can! Fate seemed to laugh at him. *You only have until you are thirty!*

Pandiammal turned to Divyamangalam and enquired, "How is Valaiyambikai?"

"Not too bad..."

Facing Visu again, she said in a stern voice, "Visu, I know you're having an affair with this girl, and going against the traditions of this samasthanam. You are tempting Vengai Ponni Amman's wrath. We are already struggling under one curse. So be careful." Turning to Archana she said, "You are here to do a job. Stick to that. Forget your love; do not *dream* of marrying my grandson. Only the palace elders can decide who will become the next rani. If you dare to defy me, you will not last another second on these grounds. Beware!"

All nerves were tensed by this sharp declaration. Thillainayagam softly asked Archana to follow him. Taking her to her room, he said, "Madam, you are beautiful enough to be a queen. But please, forget our cursed raja."

"Mind your own business!" she snapped.

"Just the response I expected." The reply came from outside the room. Karwar Karunakaran entered. "Thillainayagam is trying to look out for you. I tried warning you earlier, first in person, then with the letter and the rose..."

Seeing the last of her evidence falling to pieces, she asked, "Are you really so sure that Visu will die?"

"What else can we believe? The remedy is in that bamboo box, which can only be opened by a girl child—"

Just then a commotion broke out outside.

Karwar stopped one of the servants and asked, "What's happening?"

"Rani Valaiyambikai has gone into labour!"

Thillainayagam and Karunakaran rushed out of the room.

Immediately Archana thought of Pandikutti's warning. *Visu, here is yet another chance to prove that there is a conspiracy. Let's watch what they do if it's a girl.*

She took off at once to Chellammal's hut. There were some Noorukudis sitting outside. One of them came towards her, carrying a hurricane lantern.

"What happened, madam?"

"Where is Chellammal?"

"She's gone into labour. They've taken her—"

"When did it start?"

"While you were talking with Crazy Thatha!"

Archana walked slowly back to the palace, wondering how both women could have gone into labour at the exact same time. For one of them, it was surely natural, but the other's labour must have been induced.

Vadivelu met her at the gate. "Madam… Something very unusual has happened!"

"What?"

"Both Rani Valaiyambikai and Chellammal are being treated in the palace, by the royal doctor!"

"What? Chellammal is here?"

"Yes. Go to the north entrance gate and see for yourself."

She ran to north entrance. Outside the room, Devar stood, arms folded, silent as a statue. Next to him were Choolai, hunched and worried; Pandiammal, looking tense; Divyamangalam, her eyes closed in prayer; and stormy-faced Visu.

Archana quietly approached Visu and said, "Visu, please…there is no curse…"

"How can I believe that?" demanded Visu. "Stop giving me false hope, Arch. Pray that the child to be born is a girl."

"I don't need to pray. It *will* be girl—but it will be switched for a boy."

"You're still going by what Pandikutti told you."

"Do you doubt me, Visu?"

"Given the situation… Yes, I do!"

"Even now I am sure I am right. Tell me, how is it that both women got their delivery pains at the same moment? How come they are treating both women in the same room?"

"Humanitarianism, Archana. Can you stop suspecting everything?

When it comes to delivery, does it matter if one is rich or poor? The women of this palace are not stone-hearted!"

For the first time, Archana herself began to doubt her convictions.

Please, Visu... she begged, silently.

The door of the room opened slightly and they could hear a child's cry.

"Chellammal has had a son," said a voice from inside. Choolai jumped in the air, thrilled, and then began to fall at Devar and Pandiammal's feet. Visu stopped him.

"Raja, you mustn't worry any longer," said Choolai, overcome with joy. "The child to be born next will ensure you live a long life! I'm sure of it!"

"Aatha, Vengai Ponni Amman, show your grace at least now..." whispered Pandiammal.

"Didn't your sister-in-law have a scan?" Archana asked Visu.

"Paatti doesn't believe in too much scientific interference. She wanted her to wait to find out. Nothing wrong with that!" said Visu.

"Strange, though," Archana mused. Noticing the look on Visu's face, she asked, "What are you staring at me for?"

"I can't bear this, you suffering for my sake!"

"Who else will I suffer for?"

"Arch, all your assurances have been proven wrong. You claimed Chellammal's son would be switched, but he wasn't! Do you have anything left?"

Archana's brows were soaked with sweat.

Devar saw her discomfort, and walked over to them.

"Stop worrying, my dear. I understand your position. It will be easy for me to get you and the raja wedded if Valaiyambikai has a girl. The people of this palace know little about the modern world. They have no clue about love or romance. Just pray to Vengai Ponni Amman that it is a girl. Then I shall take care of everything..."

Slowly the door opened and the midwife beckoned Pandiammal with tearful eyes. Were they tears of hope or despair?

She whispered something into the maharani's ears, who raised her hands to bless Visu.

"It's a girl…a beautiful girl!" the midwife announced. As the women rushed into the room, Devar said a silent prayer.

Visu felt like he was floating on air. "What do you have to say now, Arch?" he demanded.

She too, felt joyful. Perhaps everything that had happened till now really had happened naturally. Perhaps she had been too sceptical. Maybe her father had been right after all; no human conspiracy could go on for so many generations. Maybe there really were supernatural powers at work, even in the modern world…

While she looked at Visu with these thoughts rushing through her head, a spoonful of white powder was being mixed into the sugar water to be fed to the newborn girl-child…

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The poisoned powder dissolved well into the sugar water, tinting it ever so slightly.

Valaiyambikai's daughter lay in her cradle, stretching her limbs, her skin very fair. The thin wisp of hair was still moist. The infant looked around with unfocused eyes, crinkling them at the sudden brightness of the new world. Gazing at Divyamangalam, Pandiammal, and Devar as they crowded around the cradle, the baby began whimpering, puckering her pink, tender lips.

"My fortune," wept Divyamangalam, cracking her knuckles to ward off the evil eye.

Valaiyambikai still lay faint on the cot.

"She had a very difficult delivery," explained the midwife. "Luckily her fall did not hurt the child. Well, such pain cannot be avoided in a Caesarian."

Archana was puzzled. *It wasn't a natural delivery?*

Though Pandiammal was irritated by Archana's presence, her annoyance was overcome by the joy of seeing her new granddaughter.

Devar was already consulting his almanac to draw up the child's horoscope.

Not a single person present spared a thought for Chellammal and her son in the next room. Even the people of the land had only one concern…

"The curse is going to end!"

"She is like a tiny flower bud!"

"The raja is saved!"

"Wait for some time. Then, at an auspicious hour, the maharani can feed some sugar water to the girl," instructed the doctor. "The child should cry a bit, so that her lungs open up."

Devar rushed to Pandiammal. "Rani, the child is born in the star of Magam," he announced. "The elders have always believed that a girl born under that star will rule the world one day!"

"Is that so?" asked Pandiammal, not yet believing her luck. "Devar, you are now relieved of the duty to safeguard Visu. He is safe now, isn't he?"

"Not quite yet, Maharani," replied Devar. "We must take good care of this infant. We must wait until she is at least three years old before she can open the box and uncover the secret. But we are definitely moving towards brighter days."

"Yes, I agree with what you say," said Pandiammal. Turning to the doctor, she said, "And you—you must not set foot outside this samasthanam until then!"

Just who is this doctor? wondered Archana, when she heard Visu whisper to her quietly.

"Arch, can you step out for a moment?"

Visu moved to his room and she followed him.

The moment he entered the huge room, he shut the door, hugged Archana, and gave her a long, wet kiss, so hard that his moustache bristled against on her upper lip. She was unable to wriggle away. His hold was very strong. When he slackened his lips, she moaned in pain.

"What is this, Visu? Are you trying to rape me?"

"The way I'm feeling now, I can hardly control myself, Arch…"

"My god, don't ruin my nuptial night's pleasure, please!"

"Don't be silly, of course I won't. Did you see my niece? Isn't she beautiful?"

"I did! Such a sweet baby! She looks so much like your brother..."

"God is still looking out for me, Archana. I've never hurt anyone in my life. Perhaps that was why I earned your love! And now my niece is here..."

Archana reluctantly cut into his enthusiasm. "Did you notice they mentioned that your sister-in-law was hurt?"

"What about that?"

"They also spoke about a Caesarian...that her labor wasn't natural?"

"Who knows? Who cares? Don't begin your investigations again," he snapped, glaring down at her. She could feel the heat of his stare in the centre of her brow. She realized that with each question, she was plucking out chunks of his excitement like pods from a jackfruit. She tried to change the mood.

"I'm sorry Visu... I was just asking. I'm so glad to see the Visu I fell in love with happy again after so many days. I don't want to rain on that happiness. I'm still worried about one thing, though..."

"About what my grandmother said?"

"Yes! How are you going to fight against their beliefs and marry me?"

"The curse was the only thing I have ever feared in my life, Archana! Even that, I never completely believed in until my brother's death. Otherwise, I bend down to no authority. You can relax. Don't ever imagine I could live a life without you in it!"

There was a discreet knock on the door.

Visu opened it. It was Devar.

"Please come in, Devar!"

"So, young Raja, are you satisfied now? Your guardian angel has just been born..."

"Thank god!"

"It is your humility that has brought you this gift. I came to wish you well!"

"I need something besides your good wishes. I need your help in convincing my grandmother."

"Oh, you mean about your marriage! Don't worry, I'll convince her. She is just reluctant to change her old ways. I think she has already promised you to someone."

"Who?"

"I am not too sure. I suppose Veera Nadar knows better. It is one of the samasthanam traditions for him to get Vengai Ponni Amman's consent for any marriage here..."

"Who is he to give consent?"

"He is the bridge between us and the Goddess. This palace may disregard his personal wishes. But we cannot dismiss the Goddess's command."

"Are you trying to scare me?"

"No! I am merely stating the truth. The relationship the two of you have is something unknown to the palace. I have never seen the river of romance flow here; only the river of power has run perennially..."

Archana stood with her chin on Visu's shoulder, listening to Devar's words, her eyes anxious. Devar could read her emotions.

"Relax, my dear! The young raja has been spared from the curse. Even if you have to go against everyone else to get married, I will stand by you two. The immediate issue is the bamboo box. Who knows what the secret remedy is? We have only crossed half the ocean. Do not get too complacent."

The telephone rang. Visu answered it. There was a woman's voice at the other end.

"Hello, who's speaking?"

"This is Visu."

"Oh, aiya! Is Archana Madam there?"

"Who is this?"

"I am her maid, Vasanthi."

"One moment please..."

The receiver switched hands.

"What is it, Vasanthi?"

"You were supposed to call me…"

"I don't think you can come here now," said Archana. "Even my position is shaky."

"Oh dear! Do they know about your romance?"

"Yes!"

"So what do you want me to do?"

"One moment, let me ask Visu."

Visu signaled, *Ask her to come.*

"He says to come when you can, Vasanthi. How is my father?"

"He's fine—but worried about you."

"I haven't been away too long, really. Though it seems like I have—so much has happened!"

"I'll come in the morning. They'll let me in, won't they?"

"Come in a taxi. Remember to bring the paint cans. I'll make sure they let you in. Hey, bring my video camera too."

"Okay!"

Archana cut the call.

"Who was that?" asked Devar.

"My friend," she said, giving her maid a promotion.

"Good. I shall leave now. You must come with me too, my dear. If the maharani comes to know you are here alone with Visu, she will be very displeased," he said.

Archana followed him reluctantly.

Every light in the palace was lit. Everyone was reluctant to sleep. A host of servants entered the rani's room with buckets of milk *payasam*. The aroma of cardamom and ghee filled the palace.

"Give everyone payasam after I have fed my granddaughter with sugar water," instructed Pandiammal. "Amma, Vengai Ponni Amman!" she prayed aloud, and fed the infant a spoonful.

The child took a gulp of air along with it, and spat out half of the water. Then she swallowed the rest.

Very slowly, the child's life left her body.

19

"The newborn infant has died!" The news spread like a forest fire.

"What! The child died? Has the goddess Lakshmi come all the way to my front door, only to turn away? Is there no relief for the people of this palace?" Divyamangalam lay flat on her back, unable to fight any more.

"What happened, doctor?" Pandiammal demanded.

The doctor didn't know what to say. "How do I know? Maybe it choked on the sugar water." She tried reviving the infant, and then pressed her ear to its chest. After a while she straightened up, looking completely flummoxed.

"It is Vanjiammal's curse! It cannot be wiped away so easily." The opinion of the gathered crowd was unanimous.

Pandiammal's forehead gathered beads of sweat. Her eyes turned into deep pools of tears.

"What happened, Maharani? What happened?" asked Devar, rushing in.

"What do I say, Devar? The Lakshmi who invited Herself in has turned back at the doorstep. I hoped that my Visu, at least, would be spared from the curse... Now it looks like he is going to die too, like every other male in this family!"

The maharani hung her head over the tiny infant, whose body had been wrapped in a silk sari. The shower of tears she cried would have been enough to put out a raging fire.

Devar stood watching the scene like a stone statue. Choolai, who was standing near his wife Chellammal, playing with his infant son, moved away, uncomfortable. He looked around at all those in front of him, their faces like ploughed fields, tears flowing like irrigation canals across them.

Some, saddened and hardened beyond the threat of the curse, were venting their anger at the spirit of Vanjiammal. "Vanji, have you no kindness in your heart? A girl child, as soft as a flower... You who are supposed to be pure, where did you find the iron in you to hurt it? What sin did these heirs commit to deserve this?"

Archana entered, having heard the wails. Visu was yet to come.

"Does the raja know?"

"Not yet. When he finds out, he will be shattered…"

Not just shattered…he will die. Aiyyo, Visu! Archana felt his despair within her. She took a peek at the infant. The baby was now shrunken; except for a slight blue tinge on its lips, there didn't seem to be any signs of trauma. Valaiyambikai had not yet regained consciousness.

Archana took one of the palace servants aside, and asked in a hushed voice, "How did the baby die?"

"They fed it sugar water. With so much love! It took just one gulp and then died…"

"How can a baby die from drinking water?"

"Even the doctor does not understand it. What can she do? This is Vanjiammal's curse. And still, no one is allowed to open that bamboo box. Not even the raja…" For some reason, the servant stopped there. Buckets of payasam lay nearby, growing cold, with no one to taste it.

Could this all be a part of the plot? Or was it truly a curse? Worried, Archana went back to Devar, who looked beaten.

"Blow after blow… No one should be made to endure so much pain," his lips murmured. "This entire lineage is going to disappear before my very eyes. Soon, no heirs will remain at all, and all the wealth of the samasthanam will go to the temple…" Karwar Karunakaran and Thillainayagam stood next to him, wiping their incessant tears.

Suddenly one of the Noorukudi women, who wore no blouse, hitched up her sari and yelled, "*Heyyyyy!*" Her hair had fallen loose, and she had gone into a trance. Two people tried to hold her down, but she threw them off with the sudden strength of an angry bull at a jallikattu.

"Hear me! I am Vanjiammal!" Her voice was so full of rage and power that the crowd fell at her feet. Pandiammal and Divyamangalam stood by, not knowing what to do.

"You two! Fall!" the woman shouted at them. They fell, hesitantly.

Only Devar was watching everything calmly.

What is this new turn of events? wondered Archana.

Thillainayagam alone stepped forward, a picture of devotion, and pleaded to the possessed woman, "Aatha, what grave mistake have we committed?"

"If there were just one or two mistakes, I could list them. Dey, you have committed thousands of mistakes, one after another!"

"Please tell us; we promise to correct ourselves. But how is it fair for you to take away a fresh life like this?"

"That was its fate! And the last heir of the palace—he is disrespecting all the traditions of the samasthanam. Tell him he must change his ways!"

"Aatha, what ways must he change?"

"He is one whose time on earth is short. How dare he yearn for a beautiful young woman?"

"I do not understand, Aatha..."

"I hear he has fallen in love with a girl at the university where he went to study. Tell her to move out of my way. If she refuses, then I will not wait until he is thirty. I shall take him away even before that!"

"Aiyyo, Aatha! How can you say this?"

"Hear me and do as I say. There is a young woman here in this samasthanam who bears the name of a flower. She has a heart that is soft, and a mole on her neck. *She* is the fated wife of the younger raja! I will be born as her daughter, and rid this family of the curse forever. If you disobey my commands, then very soon the young raja will have to meet Yaman, Lord of Death!"

"Aatha, you will be born into this family to lift the curse? What a miracle! We are blessed, Aatha! We are blessed!" Thillainayagam slapped his cheeks piously.

Her speech finished, the woman dropped to the ground, unconscious. As the crowd looked on in a daze, a tiny streak of blood spilled from her mouth. She had bitten her tongue in her hysterical ecstasy.

The women in the crowd rushed forward, each taking a spot of the blood and applying it as a thilak on their foreheads.

Archana was on the verge of collapsing. It seemed as if her life was slipping away. No one wanted anything to do with her.

"Thayi..." whispered Devar, near her ear, "go quietly to your room. If the maharani begins to make a scene too, it could take a terrible turn. Go! Don't worry. The morning will be a different story."

Seeing no other wise move, Archana went off tearfully.

Is there no salvation for Visu? Was the child's death really a natural one? Will Visu and I ever have a happy life? Who is this woman with the mole on her neck?

She wanted to howl aloud, *Visu...!*

Not wanting to shut herself in her room, she knocked on Visu's door.

He was half asleep when he opened it. As soon as he realized it was Archana, looking harrowed, he dragged her in.

"Hey Arch...what happened? You just stepped out."

She could not say a word. She threw herself at his chest and sobbed, whispering under her breath, almost as if it were a prayer, "Visu... Visu..."

"Arch...please tell me. What are you crying for?"

"Visu...everything is finished. We are done for!"

"What are you saying?"

"The baby died!"

"My god! When?"

"Just a while ago. The debate about the curse has started again. A woman even got possessed—"

"Tell me everything—"

"You are supposed to marry a woman with a mole, the one already decided for you. If you don't—"

"Who said so?"

"I told you. The woman who got possessed!"

Visu sank back, tormented. "Even the life span of my joy seems to be only a few minutes! I am unable to think what my next move should be."

"Visu, are you going to ask me to leave too? Are you going to listen to the elders in this palace? I don't believe it...but I guess I have to. My brain has gone numb. My heart is pining. Chee... What kind of life is this?" Archana could not dam her agony.

Visu had no words to comfort her.

There was a loud knock on the door. It was Karunakaran, who called from the other side, "Raja… Devar wants you to come immediately. He knows Archana Madam is with you; he says that she should come to his room. You are to tell everyone she's gone back to Madurai."

Like an automaton, Visu opened the door and followed the karwar. Archana, wiping her eyes, started along behind him.

"Madam…" Karunakaran came between her and Visu before she could take another step. "From this moment onwards, no one must know that you are here in this palace. Go down this corridor. You'll come to a room with a tiger head on the wall—Devar's private chamber. Please stay there; this is Devar's order. From the second the possessed woman gave her commands, the maharani has been hunting for you. She wants you out. To her, the Goddess's words are scripture."

Archana nodded fearfully and went down the corridor as she'd been told. Visu followed Karunakaran to meet Devar, who was sitting next to the dead infant.

Inside Devar's private chamber, Archana locked the door and looked around in wonder. There were embalmed heads of cheetahs, tigers, and bears mounted on the wall. The frozen head of a stuffed cobra welcomed her with its raised hood. In one corner of the room was a huge teak table on which a chain of *tulsi* seeds and *rudraksh* beads was laid. There was a blue-stone *lingam* with a tiny smear of sandalwood paste at the top, evidently the object of daily worship.

Next to the table was an east-facing window. The bottom edge of the horizon was brightening. The sun had travelled all the way around the world, and was now ready to tickle the Indian subcontinent awake.

"Is it dawn already?" Archana yawned, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Her lids began to close, against her will. Then she heard voices.

"There are orders to bury the infant as early as possible. Tell the woman with the mole—Sevanthi—to dress up and come along with the condolence crowd. That Madurai hussy has disappeared; the maharani must have chased her out. Good riddance! Go tell our gang that we're back in the game!"

"The burial must be done before daylight. After six hours, the spittle from the infant's mouth will start to stink and give us away. So be careful and hurry!"

Archana's heart stopped for a second. *Who's that talking?* She rushed silently out into the corridor and looked in the direction from which she thought the voices had come, but there was no one. A huge screen of woven vetiver grass hung in the corridor, obscuring her line of vision, as she hid behind the cheetah head. Archana's eyes grew as large as saucers.

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No question, we're back to the conspiracy theories, Archana thought, her brain snapping awake. The fear and anxiety that had occupied her heart for the last few hours dissolved into a newfound strength. *There's no point discussing this with Visu anymore. I must gather all my proof before I confront him with it. No more speculation. Now, who are these faceless people? How do I build a strategy to fight them?*

Sensing that she was alone once more, Archana approached the other door of the chamber and tried it. It opened onto a new passage. *Where does this lead to?* she wondered, as she walked through it, coming to a wooden door. She opened it slightly and peered in. What she saw shook her.

It was a disused stable that stored the palace junk. Two palanquins stood in the middle, shrouded in a thick mat of cobwebs. These must be the palanquins that Vishnuchittan had spoken about—the very palanquins in which Rani Rathnavathi and her children had ridden!

The historical relics appeared today like a sight of bad luck. There were broken thrones, smashed cradles, silk curtains in tatters, dusty saddles, cracked chariot lamps... Amidst the scrap the samasthanam had discarded over the ages, Archana saw something on the floor that resembled a coiled snake. Fearfully, she touched it. It was a whip. A whip made of crocodile skin, spiked with jackal teeth. The tip was blunted with use.

She cracked the whip in the air. *Visshk!* It swirled around her like a serpent and landed on the ground. Eagerly she cracked it once more.

This time the whip rose in the air, got tangled around an engraved metal plate at the edge of the loft, and brought it down.

The plate was caked with green oxidation and dust. Still, the sheen beneath the muck was obvious. She bent down and picked it up. There was a floral design on the rim, and she could make out a few letters. She dusted it with her sari pallu and began to read.

> *On this plate, the head of Nanduvadakaan, Swadeshi and Traitor to the State of Kottaipuram, having been torn from his body, shall be carried in procession throughout the Samasthanam. By order of the Raja, the head shall be displayed so that every Noorukudi may view it, and then it shall be buried along with this plate. This plate shall be carried by Kuzhandhaisami, keeper of the stables; in return, he shall be rewarded with ten acres of fertile land and one hundred coconut trees.*

Having read the plate, Archana stood stunned. Her hands trembled.

The words "buried along with the plate" stumped her. If the plate had been buried along with the head, how did it end up in the loft?

At that moment, she heard someone approaching, rustling the dry leaves outside the stable. She hid behind the palanquin.

The men who came into the stable were Noorukudis. They sat on the floor familiarly, as if they often used this place as a hideout.

"Who has gone to dig the pit?" asked one.

"Periyasami."

"That poor baby! Why wasn't it done away with while it was still in the uterus? Why wait for it to be born and then kill it?"

"Stop feeling sorry for them. Do they have any pity for us?"

"No, but what sin did that infant commit, eh?"

"The young raja is a good man, too. Does that mean he is to be spared?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I like the old man's attitude any more."

"Shh! Not so loud...he has ears all over his body. If he suspects that you think that way, it'll be the end of you. We were slaves of this samasthanam in those days; today we are slaves of that old man. But let us keep obeying his orders. Our fortunes have changed, haven't they? Now

almost two-thirds of this samasthanam is ours. Who accomplished that? Wasn't it the old man's doing?"

"True, true. I know the old man has done us a lot of good, yet when he orders that such a young life be snuffed out, my heart feels weak. Did you see that baby? Absolute royal beauty!"

"Had it been a boy, it would have survived until he was thirty years old. Poor thing, it was born a girl, so had to be done away with in thirty minutes."

"So who's watching the bamboo box?"

"I'm not sure whose turn it is today."

"Just what's in there that the old man is so afraid of, anyway?"

"Whatever it is, it's the only thing in the entire world that he *is* afraid of."

Archana was dying to see the faces of these men. She stood on her toes, but could only see their bare backs. In a spectacularly clumsy move, she tipped a chair over right on top of the junk pile. It clattered to the ground. The men turned round in panic. Their oily, dirty faces were immediately stamped in Archana's memory.

"What was that?" asked one of them.

"Must be mice," came the reply—luckily for Archana.

"Come, it's getting late. Let's move, before the palace authorities send out a search party for us."

"As if things will come to standstill without us there. Inside the palace Thillainayagam rules the roost."

"Naturally. Thillainayagam is Devar's left hand… Of course he rules. He has to show off his power over us."

"Didn't he get Irusan caught by the police?"

"Sure, but Irusan's been released now. Why bother about that?"

"That was only because the old man got him out. Actually, Irusan doesn't know anything. Because of a few of us like you and me, idiots like him get caught."

"Let's go. This is a never-ending topic. We could go on forever."

"Wait here a minute! Did you see that woman getting possessed?"

"Of course—again the old man's handiwork. And that woman was some artist, eh? It was the old man's order: 'If you want your niece to

become the next rani, do as I say!' He swore it was Vengai Ponni Amman's order. Of course there can no argument to that. Imagine the power just the name holds! The rani, even the maharani...everyone shivers at the mere mention of that name."

"As if we ourselves don't tremble! Don't you remember when Rasappan said that everything being done in the Goddess's name was a fraud? What happened then? The old man hauled him off to the temple and demanded that he repeat it in front of the idol. He actually dared to do it! And then he bled through his nose and mouth and died. Aatha is a ferocious mother. You be careful. Weren't we warned not to ask too many questions? If we do, we'll end up like Rasappan. Obey the old man and stay alive, that's my policy."

"Thank god there are still places like this left in this palace, or we wouldn't have a spot to sit and chat. So what's the plan for Aatha's festival this time?"

"A bullock cart race, as usual. The original plan was to finish off the city girl during that. Lucky for her she's gone back. She's an arrogant one; she tried digging too deep into our secrets. The old man had to step in firmly to keep things in order."

They walked away. Only then did Archana remember to close her gaping mouth. *Adengappa! What a diabolical plot! What brains must be behind it! Who is this old man they are talking about?* she thought, amazed. *Who could it be? Devar? Thillainayagam? The storyteller, Vishnuchittan?* Nagged by questions, she shut the door behind her and made her way back to her room, hiding the metal plate under her sari.

When she entered the room, Devar was standing on his head, doing his *sirsasanam*. From his position of an erect upside-down tree, he righted himself, spying the plate she held under her sari.

"Where were you?"

"Just out for a stroll..."

"Is this any time for you to go out strolling? If the maharani were to see you, she would throw you out once and for all."

Archana remained silent.

"What is that plate?"

"I found it in the stable."

"The stable? Why did you go there? The Noorukudi men sometimes go there for a smoke. I am told it is haunted."

"I didn't see any ghosts there." Realizing this might have sounded impertinent, she looked at his face.

"You sound different. What happened?" Devar demanded perceptively.

"Nothing. Where is Visu?"

"He's with the infant's body."

"And you're here?"

"I don't miss my morning yoga for anything. Now show me the plate."

Reluctantly, she gave it to him. He stared at it for a while.

"Are you sure you got this in the stable?" he asked.

"Why would I lie?"

He looked more keenly at it, remembering the scene of Nanduvadakaan's head being taken on a procession. He couldn't stop the flood of tears.

"Devar, you're crying!"

"What can I do but cry? Vanjiammal, who cursed this whole royal line… Her husband's head was taken on a procession on this plate."

"So it really happened?"

"Didn't Vishnuchittan tell you?"

"He only told me half the story. Before he could finish, a branch fell on him."

"Wait till he can tell you the rest. I cannot. I lack the stomach for it." Devar rose to leave. Before opening the door, he turned round and advised her in a hushed tone, "This palace is very mysterious. There are many puzzles that even I have never been able to solve. So many pits of quicksand, impossible to escape. Please be very careful. I have given you refuge now, but it is only because of the younger raja.

"Amongst all the heirs of the palace I have seen, he alone is a gem—even his brother Gajendran was terribly lecherous. I want to help fulfill Visu's wish and translate your love into marriage. And so, you should not step out of this room without my permission."

He walked out of the room to find Vasanthi, holding her suitcase, and Karwar Karunakaran in the corridor.

She bowed respectfully to Devar.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Archana's friend, Vasanthi."

"Fine. Go into the room. But you must not step outside today," he said, and walked off swiftly. Vasanthi stared after him curiously.

Archana peeked out and called, "Hi, Vasanthi!"

"Be careful, madam!" cried the karwar, pushing them back inside and shutting the door.

Archana could not contain her joy. "Oh, I'm so happy you got here, Vasanthi!"

"Why madam, what is the problem?"

"Vasanthi, you won't believe it when I tell you. This palace is so weird—everything about it is baffling!"

"You said that people have found out about your romance?"

"Yes! I'm a little worried that Visu might get pulled over to their side. It all depends on our next course of action." Archana went on to give Vasanthi a detailed account of everything that had happened. When she finished, Vasanthi was staring at her, forgetting to blink.

"Hey... Say something."

"What can I say? My life so far has revolved around cleaning your house, chopping vegetables, watching television, and—if I have some spare time—reading monthly novels. It's hard to believe what you say is the truth. If it is, then we have to solve this once and for all."

"Excellent, Vasanthi! Come on, give me some ideas."

Vasanthi sat for a long time, rubbing her chin. Suddenly she sprang up, "Madam, the first thing to tackle is that woman with the mole. She's part of a plot to separate you and the young raja. The second thing is to find out what's in that bamboo box."

"Exactly! But how do we do it?"

"No mere mortal will be able to stop Visu and that woman from getting married. So, the burden must fall on Vengai Ponni Amman."

"What are you saying, Vasanthi?"

"It's not only the Noorukudi women who can be possessed by Vengai Ponni Amman. Last evening I watched a television program where a professor demonstrated how spirit possession can be faked. Wait and see how hysterical *I* can be when possessed!"

21

As the heat of the morning sun spread over the land, and everyone stood around the shining new tomb, their young dream of hope was laid to rest. Valaiyambikai, who had only recently regained consciousness, did not even have the strength to cry for her child. She stood propped against Divyamangalam's shoulder. Outside the cemetery compound were the Noorukudis, a picture of sorrow, along with groups of important officials of the region. A man approached the distressed family with an open pen and a pad of paper.

"Excuse me," he asked Thillainayagam, "how did the baby die?"

"Who are you? Why do you ask?"

"Have you forgotten me? I'm from the press."

"How did you find out about this? How did you get here?" Thillainayagam almost shouted.

"It's a known fact that strange and mysterious things go on in this palace, so it's only natural for it to draw media attention. That's our business, after all. Will you give me your opinion on the matter?"

Thillainayagam shuddered. "If the maharani finds out about this, she'll skin me alive. She couldn't bear having Gajendran's death sensationalized, let alone this new tragedy. Please stop interfering! These are private matters of the palace."

"Maybe they are," the reporter persisted adamantly. "But they're still worth a study. I believe these mysterious happenings demonstrate the power of 'divine justice.' In the West, there has been a lot of research done on ghosts—people have even photographed them. Here, you people are frightened of a dead woman's curse. If we write about this, don't you think it will make a man who wants to go down the wrong path think twice? And won't it also prove the power of a woman—even after she is dead?"

The logic of the explanation irritated Thillainayagam. Among the crowd of Noorukudis, Vasanthi was hiding, dressed as one of them, watching Thillainayagam with a bitter smile.

One part of her was congratulating herself on the smart move she and Archana had made by calling in the media. Another part was shivering with grief at the loss of such a young life. Hopefully this would make the schemers more wary...

Three days flew by. The Noorukudi community postponed their temple festival, acknowledging the mourning period of the palace. And on the fourth day...

A crowd of dancers wearing bells, along with drummers playing urumi and *chenda* drums, swarmed into the palace grounds. Marching ahead of them was Veera Nadar. Next to him was a woman with her head bent to the ground, like a sunflower at dusk, dressed in a traditional sari. On her neck was a large mole.

The sound of the drums reached the palace.

On the top floor, Thillainayagam pushed aside the curtain, peeked out, and raced downstairs.

"What is that noise?" he asked one of the servants.

"Our people are coming—along with Veera Nadar."

"What's the matter?"

"They are starting the temple festival. They must have come to invite you to it. Also, Veera Nadar hasn't yet offered his condolences for the baby's death."

"Well, he fasts for five days before and after each new moon, without moving..."

The group had reached the main steps of the palace. Pandiammal, grieving, came to the top step along with her family and entourage.

An old man stepped ahead of Veera Nadar. "Namaskaram, Maharani!"

Amongst the troubled faces on the top step was an unshaven Visu.

Veera Nadar threw him a deep look before he began to speak. "Only after I broke my fast did I come to know about the birth and death of the

child. Everything is as Aatha wishes it; but that does not mean we should not grieve. After all, we are mere humans."

The crowd craned their necks to hear him. Vasanthi, standing next to Devar, was sceptical. *They claim they're human, eh?*

"We do not usually perform the ritual mourning for one who dies so young, Maharani," Veera Nadar went on. "Still, we wanted to share your loss. That's why we did nothing for these three days. Vengai Ponni Amman's festival begins today. The young raja should preside over it, and all three of you ranis must grace the occasion. What follows will bode well for all of us."

He looked at the woman next to him. She slowly came forward and fell at Pandiammal and Divyamangalam's feet.

"Rani Amma," Veera Nadar said, "Aatha has saved us the trouble of finding a bride for the young Raja. This is the woman she has selected."

Visu sprang back as if he had stepped on fire. *Dusty hair piled on top of her head; her forehead smeared with kumkum and vibhuti; a podgy figure, dark-skinned, with a huge mole on her neck!*

Pandiammal, with tears in her eyes, bade the woman rise, and embraced her gratefully. Lifting her chin gently, she asked, "Are you consenting only because Aatha has commanded, or because you really want this?"

"Both," replied the woman, slowly. Visu's face was ashen. The people in the crowd watched the scene without blinking an eyelid. Suddenly there was a commotion; Valaiyambikai had arrived.

She has come...still so frail and tender from the delivery, marveled the crowd.

She went straight to Veera Nadar and fell at his feet in tears.

He looked her unhappily. "Please do not weep, Thayi. It is She who made you a queen, and it is She who is making you cry today. It is our fate."

Valaiyambikai stood erect and shook away her tears. Suddenly her body went rigid, and then began to shiver. She started to dance as one possessed.

"Aatha has come... Aatha has come!" roared the crowd.

"*Heyyy!*" she yelled at the top of her voice. The crowd trembled with devotion. Pandiammal and Divyamangalam stood with their palms folded, while Devar merely watched. As usual, it was Thillainayagam who stepped forward.

"So, Aatha, you have come again!" he said.

"Dey...!" came a hollow voice that did not seem to belong to Valaiyambikai. "Who is the murderer? Who is the one that is sharpening his knife against my son?"

"*Your* son? Aatha, I don't understand..."

"The young raja is like a son to me. He is going to live for a hundred years! No one shall deny him what he wants. I order you to accept his wish, be it for his marriage or for anything else. This is my command!"

"This is your command, Aatha? Then what about the woman you selected earlier?"

"He shall marry her only if he so desires. If he does not, then leave him to his own wishes!"

"He wants to marry that girl who studied with him, Aatha."

"Then get him married to her. I will be born to her—as her daughter," Valaiyambikai said, and then fell faint.

Vasanthi immediately took over from where she left off. "Now I am in a stranger's body!" she shouted in the same hollow voice, "because I know this stranger is a devout believer. She would sacrifice even her life for me. My word and her word are as one. Treat her well; if you do not, you shall suffer torture, torment, and finally annihilation from the face of this Earth!"

Then, promptly, she too fell faint. Blood bubbled from her mouth.

Veera Nadar stood frozen for a second, then quickly shook himself, bent down, dipped his finger in the blood, and placed it as a thilak on his forehead.

The face of the woman with the mole paled in fear.

Pandiammal looked ecstatically at Visu. He wore a cheerful grin.

"Raja, Aatha has promised you a hundred years. You are blessed!" Veera Nadar said, relaxing his posture for the first time, genuinely rejoicing.

Divyamangalam gave Visu a hug. "Aatha has never blessed anyone so!"

"Now can I marry Archana?" Visu asked immediately.

"Of course. Go ahead! Aatha has blessed you with a hundred years, and approved the marriage of your choice."

Valaiyambikai and Vasanthi regained consciousness at the same moment. Both had innocent expressions on their face as they inquired, in weak voices, "What just happened?"

"Aatha came over both of you," replied Devar.

"Is that so?" they asked, and slapped their cheeks piously.

Thillainayagam turned to the Noorukudi and announced, "Dey, sound the drums! Let the festival begin! The young raja has been blessed! He will give you all new clothes; he will build a hospital and a school! Go on, celebrate!"

The sound of the chenda and urumi drums crackled through the skies. The crowd dispersed, with Veera Nadar leading them to the temple.

Visu had but one thought—he had to speak to Archana. He rushed to the telephone and dialed.

The call was answered after a few rings by Kasinathan.

"Hello, is Archana there?"

"Who is speaking?"

"I'm Visu."

"Oh, the young raja?" said Kasinathan scornfully. "What do you want, sir?"

"I want to speak Archana!"

"I'm very sorry. You must forget her—"

"I can't."

"What do you mean? I know your situation. Why do you want to spoil my daughter's life? Anyway, she's not here. She's gone off on a tour—"

"Where to?"

"Mister, I'm warning you. I'm not against love marriage per se. Nevertheless, I'm warning you to stay away...and you know why! I want

my daughter to live with her flowers and pottu. If you wish that for her as well, then you must refuse her…even if she begs."

The telephone was cut abruptly. When Visu turned round, dejected, he had quite a shock: In front of him were Archana and Vasanthi—along with Valaiyambikai!

Vasanthi ran around the room, sealing all the doors and windows. Visu was still gaping at the women in disbelief.

"Archana, you're still here? I was told you'd gone home." He turned to Valaiyambikai. "Anni, how come you're with them?" Visu's questions seemed to stick in his throat.

"You tell him," said Archana to Valaiyambikai. "He'll never believe me."

Valaiyambikai looked straight into Visu's eyes, and he saw a boiling rage there. "Thambi, my child did not die naturally. She was killed!"

Visu quaked in horror.

"Archana was right from the beginning," Valaiyambikai continued. "There is a huge conspiracy going on. They use the curse to keep us from uncovering their plot."

"May I tell the rest?" asked Archana. She turned to Vasanthi, who looked outside and signaled that the coast was clear. "Remember how just after the child died, a Noorukudi woman got possessed, demanding that I leave town and saying there was a girl already fixed for you?"

"Yes…"

"For the past three days, Devar has let me hide in his room. There is an old, unused stable behind his room, and it was there that I heard two men talking about poisoning the child." She went on to give him the full details of that conversation.

"Visu, everything I've just told you is the truth, and nothing but the truth; I saw it and heard it myself! I can even recognize those two men. Please don't dismiss this as my imagination, like you did before."

"I don't know any more, Archana! I don't know what to believe," he said in frustration.

"I will explain, Thambi. Do you trust me?" asked Valaiyambikai.

"First, Anni, tell me: How did you join these two?" Visu asked.

"I knew there was something suspicious about my daughter's death. In the first place, my labour wasn't natural. When I was going up the stairway, one of the steps was smeared with castor oil—I remember that clearly. I slipped and hurt my stomach. It wasn't serious, for I had not yet gone into labour. I fell faint for a bit, but I was not completely unconscious. I could still hear voices whispering to the doctor that I would have to deliver that same night.

"She tried inducing labour, but I was not yet ready. She was hesitant to go for a C-section, fearing it might harm the child. It might even die. 'Go on!' they said. 'You must do it now!' I know I did not imagine that voice, Thambi. I cannot tell you the torment I was going through.

"I never wanted to marry your brother. They forced me into it, and then they made me a widow. Now they have murdered my only child, and I'm left with no one. The doctor who cooperated in their schemes has disappeared.

"I needed an explanation, so I went to Devar. Though I wept and begged, he said he knew nothing. He kept insisting it was *the curse*. I think my adamance broke him down a little. He promised to ask Thillainayagam to clear up the mysteries, and left. It was in his room that I met Archana. She already had her suspicions. So we decided to join forces.

"Our plan was to cut a diamond with another diamond. The first scene was my possession, to clear the way for your marriage. Now that that's done, we move on to the more difficult scene…"

Visu could no longer contain himself. "What's next, Anni?"

"We must open that bamboo box and find out what secret is hidden there."

"If you are so sure that the curse is a lie, why do you need to know the remedy?"

"It's not for the remedy. When Archana overheard those two men in the stable, they said that even the 'old man'—whoever that is, he's the main player in this plot—is scared of that box."

"Oh… So we need to know what he's afraid of. Right?"

"Exactly. We need to know the reason that box is guarded. Why do they say that anyone who dares to open it will die? And why did those who did try to open it die horrible deaths?"

Visu nodded thoughtfully.

"Visu, do you believe me now?" Archana asked, tenderly.

"Of course!" He grinned, giving her a thumbs-up. "I'm sick of being afraid—it's pure torture. I'd be a fool not to believe you."

"Then let the curtain go down on our tension, trouble, and confusion! If we don't fight back now, we're done for. Let us at least die brave, okay?" The others were emboldened by Archana's strong declaration. All four placed their right hands in a pile and swore in unison.

"Where is the bamboo box, Visu?"

"In the puja room."

"Is it closely guarded?"

"I have no clue. I hardly ever go there."

"I can tell you how to get in," said Valaiyambikai.

"How?"

"I have to go there often to pray. Inside the puja room, the bamboo box is kept on a square pedestal. Above the pedestal in the roof, there are glass panels—skylights. In fact, if you go up to the terrace and look down through the skylights, you can see the box. There are two guards always stationed there—"

"What are guards doing on the terrace?"

"They're palace sentries. Most of the sentries only watch in the nights, except the two on the terrace who are there even during the day. They've always been there. No one has ever made an issue of it."

"How do we get into the room?"

"I don't think that will be a problem. Because we faked being possessed by Her, the samasthanam accepts both Vasanthi and myself as ardent devotees of Vengai Ponni Amman. We can enter the puja room whenever we want to. But the guards…"

"I'll take care of them," offered Visu. "I'll go up to the terrace for fresh air and draw them into a chat."

"When do we set off?"

"This evening."

"And you, Archana?"

"I am going to find out the rest of the story from Vishnuchittan."

"What do we need that for?"

"Don't be silly, Visu. We have to find out the identity of this 'old man' they're talking about."

"All we have to do is ask those two guys you saw in the stable."

"Fabulous—and ruin the game before we've even started? We've thrown a wrench into their plans with our possession dance. But they will have sharpened their scheme by now. Those two men might even be willing to give their lives to keep it a secret."

"Will you be able to figure out who the mastermind is from what Vishnuchittan tells you?"

"Maybe not exactly, but I expect to get a clue. We have to know the reason behind all this. Just claiming that there is a conspiracy will hold no salt with your mother and grandmother. To convince them, we have to know the historical background—how this whole curse began."

"Fine. But please be very careful Archana. Why don't you take Vadivelu with you? I trust him totally."

"Okay. All the best!"

The sun had started going down in the west, gleaming like a ball of acid.

Valaiyambikai walked to the puja room with a lit diya in her palm. Behind her was Vasanthi, also holding a diya.

"Are you Archana's friend?" Divyamangalam asked her.

"Yes."

"How did you come to know about our Vengai Ponni Amman?"

"Oh, She has devotees far beyond the limits of your samasthanam. I am also a strong devotee of Parashakthi. I fast every Friday and Saturday."

"Oh, is that right? Please, go and do your puja."

As they entered the puja room, Visu quietly made his way up to the terrace.

He could see the palace gardens from up there. On the left was a slim mud path. Archana was walking down it towards the Noorukudi dwellings, followed by Vadivelu, who was carrying a basket of fruits.

"Vadivelu," she asked him, "what do *you* think about this curse?"

"It's all very confusing, madam! It's not as if it is a snake that could be beaten to death, or a weed that could be trodden..."

"What would you say if I told you that it's not a curse at all, but a conspiracy?"

"Madam, what are you saying?"

"You'll understand in time. I want you to do as I tell you."

"Of course, madam."

The hutments were empty except for Vishnuchttan, who was lying in a cot, his leg in a cast.

"The others must be at the festival," said Vadivelu.

"Thatha..." Archana said softly.

"Who is that?" asked Vishnuchittan.

"It's me, Archana."

"Who? Oh, you're the girl from the city who came to listen to my stories."

"Yes. How are you now?" she inquired, as she sat next to him.

"Oh, why must I suffer such pain in my old age, Thayi?" he moaned.

Archana took an orange from the basket, peeled it, and fed him a piece. "You stopped before you finished the story..."

"Why do you want to listen to that horrible tale?" asked Vishnuchittan. But he had already begun to remember again.

"Thatha, I don't want the whole tale. I want to know about Vanjiammal. Just tell me that part. Why did they carry her husband's head in a procession?"

After she mentioned that old horror, there was no stopping the racehorse of Vishnuchittan's memory. It sped back a hundred years, and came to a halt on one auspicious day in the month of Aippasi.

Dhoom... dhoom... dhoom! Udukkai drums pealed through the settlement. Veera Nadar, the soothsayer, started to tell his predictions in front of Vengai Ponni Amman. The Noorukudi were gathered around him.

"Aatha... will my daughter recover from the pox?"

"Yes, in ten days."

"Will my husband get a better post in the palace?"

"Come here daily for prayer, and he will get the job."

Horse hooves were heard in the distance.

The raja has come... The raja has come! The crowd got ready for the welcome.

The horse turned the corner and stopped. Nanduvadakaan and his bride Vanjiammal climbed down from it, dressed in wedding finery.

"Aley, Nanduvadakaan!" someone from the crowd shouted. "How could you marry in secret, without the raja's prasadham?"

Watching the couple get off the horse, the crowd grumbled. Veera Nadar had just finished his vigorous drumming and come back to balance. "What is this nonsense, Nanduvadakaan?" he snarled.

"It's not nonsense at all. It is a union of consent!"

"*We* would have got you married, would we not have?"

"For sure! And then you would have handed my wife over to the royals in the name of prasadham, and destroyed our self-pride forever!"

"The royal blessing is not to be scorned. It is a tradition for our community."

"Why must you hang on to that crass ritual?"

"Stop right there! You already have too many things going against you. You are crossing the borders of the samasthanam; you show no respect to the whites who visit us... This marriage will only prepare your death bed!"

"What do you plan to do? Chop off my tongue?"

When the news of Vanjiammal's marriage reached Vengai Raja, he thirsted for blood. He had partially recovered from the gunshot wound, but this made him hurt all over again.

Rathnavathi, on the other hand, was thrilled that someone was opposing the rajas. Of course, she said nothing aloud.

Finally, Nanduvadakaan was sentenced to fall at the rajas' feet a hundred times, and then send Vanjiammal for the royal blessing.

"I would rather pluck out my tongue and die! Go, tell them I shall do so! I am not without pride, ready to lick the rajas' asses like the rest of you Noorukudis. They must learn to treat us like humans. The whole of India is fighting for freedom… We will not rest until we chase the whites out of this country!"

The raja heard of this protest, and devised a new punishment for Nanduvadakaan. "Tie him to the temple flagpole. He shall not be fed or given water for three days and nights. He shall be a public exhibit, for the whole town to see!"

This was announced throughout the samasthanam.

Veera Nadar had Nanduvadakaan dragged into the Vengai Ponni Amman temple on his knees.

"The rajas have complained that you are talking too much."

"What else is a mouth for?"

The crowd looked on in silence. Vishnuchittan watched Nanduvadakaan's heroism with a swell of pride.

"As per the rajas' orders, you will be chained to the flagpole for three days and three nights. No one shall feed you, or give you as much as a drop of water."

The sentence shook the people.

"What was my crime? Why should I be punished at all?" demanded Nanduvadakaan. But there was no one to argue for him.

He was hoisted up and chained to the flagpole.

Vanjiammal came running forward, but was forcefully held back and then taken away by her grandfather, Pandikarrupar.

On the fourth morning, even as the sun's rays were spreading, Vanjiammal took her exhausted lover in her arms. She sprinkled water from a mud pot onto his face, and pried open his lips and fed him.

Gently calling the life back into himself, he rolled his eyes up to her. She untied his hands and he fell onto her lap, exhausted.

"Please, do not speak out anymore. Let us stay quiet."

"Vanji, but now is the time to speak out! Did you see how not one person stood up for me? What is it that they fear?" he asked, becoming more animated. "Before this, I thought *Vande Mataram* was a slogan for independence from the whites. But no; it is a call for independence from our own rajas! Vande Mataram! Vande Mataram!"

At the very moment that he yelled out "Vande Mataram," passionately and fervently demanding freedom, Rathnavathi was coming—along with her entourage and the bamboo box.

"Was that the same bamboo box that now holds the family's secret?" Though she was engrossed in the story, Archana could not avoid interrupting with the question. Vishnuchittan only stared back at her wordlessly.

Archana turned her wrist to check the time. She sighed in frustration. *Valaiyambikai and Vasanthi should be in the puja room right now*, she thought. *I wonder what's happening?*

Valaiyambikai looked cautiously around before approaching the box. Visu was busy distracting the guards on the terrace. Even as the men turned to the young raja, surprised to see him there, Valaiyambikai dusted the flower petals left from the last puja off the top of the box and pried it open. Vasanthi peeped eagerly over her shoulder and immediately drew back in fear.

There was a distinct stench emerging from inside the box. Terror spread through Vasanthi's eyes like ink on a blotting paper. Valaiyambikai was in the same state.

In the box was a skull and a few severed fingers, dark and dry as prunes. Along with them was a green silk sari, now old and stiff as cardboard, and a chain of black beads.

"What is this?" whispered Vasanthi. Valaiyambikai reached in and took out the sari apprehensively. From inside the folds of fabric fell an old piece of folded paper. On it was a letter written in the stylized script of a bygone era. It looked like a testament. Vasanthi quickly pulled Valaiyambikai back from reading it. She extended her sari pallu and signaled Valaiyambikai to empty the contents of the box into it. They fell in

noiselessly, except one single recently-severed finger of an infant, which dropped to the ground. Not pausing to think, Valaiyambikai picked it up and threw it, too, into Vasanthi's sari pallu. Vasanthi left quickly. Valaiyambikai remained to set the box back on its pedestal and place the dried petals carefully back on top. Then she too quietly began to move out of the room.

Valaiyambikai could not shake the feeling that she was being watched. *Run!* shouted a voice in her mind. She was about to, when Pandiammal entered with a smile.

"So, my dear, have you finished your puja?"

Heart pounding in fear, Valaiyambikai could only nod.

"Where is the girl who came in with you?"

"She left."

"Please don't bring her here again. This is a very sacred place. Only members of our family should be allowed to enter this room," said Pandiammal as she approached the bamboo box and piously slapped her cheeks.

When Valaiyambikai and Vasanthi came out of the puja room, they were met by a Noorukudi man with a plate of offerings.

"What is this?" asked Pandiammal.

"Offerings from the Vengai Ponni Amman temple! The first day's offering belongs to the palace, Maharani."

She took a bit of the vibhuti and smeared it on her forehead. Valaiyambikai did the same, and then put some in her mouth. As they walked back, Pandiammal sighed.

"I feel sorry for you, my dear. You are a woman who should be ruling over this palace as a queen. I was hoping that you would usher in better times, but my hopes were dashed. Visu is our only remaining heir. If we lose him too, then this family may as well vanish. And all this wealth..."

"What are you trying to tell me, Athai?"

"Nothing...except that I have a bad feeling. A feeling that the pride, fame, and status that this samasthanam has enjoyed is dying out, little by little, every day. When I became the maharani of this palace, I entered with a very heavy heart. I had no wish to marry here. However, once the

children came, I too began to take a pride in my position. I, at least, have a grandson. But what about you?"

Should I reveal to this old maharani that I lost my child to a vicious plot? Valaiyambikai boiled with the injustice. *We have been cheated all along, Athai. We have been deliberately widowed! Stop believing that anyone who opens the bamboo box will die at once. Here I stand before you, still breathing...*

Valaiyambikai opened her mouth to speak these words that were thundering inside her. But instead of the words, a stream of blood poured out, bubbling up from her lungs.

Pandiammal screamed. Hearing the alarm, Devar appeared almost at once.

"What happened, Maharani?"

"What can I say, Devar? One moment, she was speaking to me... then suddenly she began spurting blood!"

Devar felt for her pulse. It was weak, but still there.

"Dey! Take her to the doctor immediately!"

"Did you get to see what was inside?" asked Visu in a hushed voice.

"Better than that. I brought everything with me!" Vasanthi grinned.

"Where is Anni?"

"No idea. She was supposed to come too..."

"Why did you leave her alone?"

"I left the room while she was replacing the box. I thought she was right behind me..."

"So, what was inside?"

"See for yourself!"

She threw down the contents from her folded pallu. Visu was stunned.

"What is all this?"

"I'm confused too. Look at this—it looks like a will."

"It doesn't just *look* like a will," said Visu, studying it carefully. "It *is* one. I can't read it properly, though. Will you switch on the light?"

Vasanthi touched the switch. Current surged forth from it, lifting her body clear off the ground and throwing her a metre away.

"*Amma…!*" yelled Vasanthi as she crashed to the floor.

Shocked, Visu turned around. Hurriedly he hid the will and came to shake her. "Vasanthi… Vasanthi!"

She lay still on the floor, like a torn rag.

"In those days, all this ground surrounding the Vengai Ponni Amman temple was covered by a thick bamboo grove," Vishnuchittan narrated. "It was infested with poisonous snakes. One day, Rani Rathnavathi was attacked by a snake…but just before it bit her, a bamboo stalk fell on it, and it died. Rathnavathi was convinced that Aatha had come to her in the shape of the bamboo and saved her life. As an act of gratitude, she had one of the Noorukudi artisans make a box from the same bush, in which she placed a silk sari and blouse for Aatha, and she had the box taken on a procession.

"That procession arrived just after Nanduvadakaan had been untied. There he lay in front of them, on Vanjiammal's lap, yelling 'Vande Mataram!' "

Vishnuchittan paused for a moment. "Dear child…please do not treat what I am going to say next lightly. It is about the curse—the curse that is shaking the very roots of this family!"

"Please…that's exactly what I want to know about. Tell me!" said Archana.

"Kindly do not speak about this to anyone. If the maharani comes to know that I have been talking about this, she'll hang me upside down!"

24

"What has the maharani got to do with the story you're telling me, Thatha?"

"The maharani is a wounded soul. Though she might seem like a strict disciplinarian, she is actually very timid. She was born a Noorukudi, and would have lived and married among us. Instead, she married into the palace, and became the maharani. That cursed prasadham dashed her hopes of romance. But it also allowed the Noorukudis to gain royal status here."

Realizing that she was listening to history hitherto untold, Archana's eyes widened. Vishnuchittan continued his story.

"Vande Mataram! Vande Mataram!" Nanduvadakaan was yelling loudly.

"Aley, shut up! The maharani is coming. If she hears you, she'll string you to the flagpole again," warned one of the courtiers, just as Rathnavathi arrived at the temple. She looked down at the passionate, hurt man, and gave a faint smile. The priest ran forward to welcome her. Rathnavathi kept gazing at Vanjiammal as she entered the temple.

The puja began. The bamboo box was taken into the garbagraham. At that moment, there was a chirp from a gecko on the temple wall.

"Rani, you have brought this box at an auspicious moment. Did you hear the gecko chirp?" asked the priest. He removed the sari and draped it over the Amman idol. The Noorukudis were gathered outside, looking on stonily.

"Call them in," ordered Rathnavathi.

"Please come in…" the priest beckoned.

The crowd entered the inner chamber of the temple.

Nanduvadakaan and Vanjiammal watched everything, totally shaken. Rathnavathi moved close to Vanjiammal and put her arms around her to comfort her.

"Please come in and worship; lay your worries at the Goddess's feet. From this moment on, your troubles will disappear. I beg your forgiveness for my husband's arrogance. I promise you that no one in this palace will touch you…" As Rathnavathi turned away, the crowd looked at Vanjiammal as if she had been just crowned the queen.

At the palace, Vengai Rajan and Simma Rajan heard of Rathnavathi's promise, and they simmered with rage.

"Just what is my anni thinking of?" growled Simma Rajan at Thandavan. "They are slaves! We have bought them, body and soul. What the hell is my useless brother doing about this? He's not the one I should have shot—I should have shot this Nanduvadakaan!"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think your brother will say anything against Rani Rathnavathi," murmured Thandavan.

"Why not?"

"Because the riches she brought with her as her dowry count for three-fourths of the wealth of this samasthanam. And also…"

"Go on!"

"She comes from the royal family of Malairajapuram. They are extremely powerful; we cannot afford to anger them. Your brother has arranged an alliance between you and her younger sister Ranganayaki. He will not want that to be spoiled…"

Simma Rajan realized that he would have to swallow his anger. In order to gain the wealth and the bride, he would have to abide by his sister-in-law's rules.

"Also," Thandavan went on, "your anni does not approve of the tradition of the royal prasadham. It would be better if you stopped all that, at least until Ranganayaki becomes your bride."

As Thandavan tried to slip away, Simma Rajan whispered, "But Anni can only protest against the things she knows about. On the other hand, if she doesn't come to know…"

Obviously, he was better at acting than changing for the better.

Days passed. An uneasy peace surrounded the palace. Palanquins were banished, and chariots became the new mode of royal transport. Vanjiammal gave birth to a son.

As the midwife handed the child to Vanjiammal, she said fearfully, "Dear God, he is born in the sign of Viruchigam, the scorpion—and under the star Kettai! This child is destined either to build a regime, or to break one. Who knows which state will fall at his hands?"

"Thatha," Archana cut in, "do you really believe the birth star has anything to do with one's personality?"

"That's a matter of faith."

"What about you? Do you believe?"

"I believe. It was after the birth of Viruchigamani, son of Vanjiammal, that this palace gradually began to go to ruin."

March 8th, 1908. Nellai District.

On the open maidan, an impassioned group of Swadeshi freedom

fighters thronged around the podium. Nanduvadakaan was among them, wearing a turban on his head. The speakers on the platform gave rousing calls for independence. The crowd throbbed with passion. The police stood by, enraged that the citizens could gather in such strength in spite of the state ban.

"Charge!" ordered a white sergeant.

The police dashed into the mob, flailing their lathis. The people ran in panic.

A lathi landed with a sharp crack on Nanduvadakaan's forehead.

"Amma...!" he called out, as he fell on the ground. Somehow, he found the strength to get up and escape. When he approached the palace, hungry and in pain, Simma Rajan welcomed him with the end of the fully loaded gun.

"You think your 'Vande Mataram' is more important than your duty here, do you?"

Nanduvadakaan maintained his silence.

"You idiots demanding freedom today will soon be weeping at the white man's feet. Why don't you practice by falling at my feet now, and begging for my pardon?" Simma Rajan smirked as he sat down on a cane chair.

Nanduvadakaan wiped the streaming blood from his forehead and started to walk away.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"I must go and see my wife and son..."

"No, you shall not!"

"Who are you to tell me so?"

"I am your master...the master who bought your entire clan!" With this declaration, he gave Nanduvadakaan a harsh whack with the butt of the gun, on the same spot where he had been wounded by the lathi.

Not batting an eyelid, Nanduvadakaan called out, "Vande Mataram!" Gathering the last bit of strength, he spat in Simma Rajan's face, and then collapsed on the ground, unconscious.

"Dey... Thandavan!" Simma Rajan's roar was heard in all the eight directions, as he wiped the spit off his face. Every roosting bird took flight in fear. "Chop off his tongue!"

Hearing this brutal order, tears filled Thandavan's eyes.

"Do as I say," shouted Simma Rajan. "Or else!" The gun was now pointing at Thandavan's chest. Without another word, Thandavan drew out his dagger and bent down to Nanduvadakaan.

"Ahh...!"

His tongue chopped off, blood streaming from his mouth, Nanduvadakaan's body twisted on the floor in horrible pain. The cry echoed through even the farthest corners of the palace.

"The tongue that dared to utter *Vande Mataram* in my presence—the tongue of the man that had the guts to spit at my face—this tongue is to be placed on a betel leaf and paraded through the Noorukudi village. Let this be a lesson to the slaves!"

The crowd gathered to watch, not daring to blink or make a sound. Among them was young Vishnuchittan, who had forgotten to adjust his loincloth.

Hearing of her husband's plight, Vanjiammal came running with her son, and lay weeping at Nanduvadakaan's feet.

Tears and baby spittle wet his feet. Nanduvadakaan opened his eyes with a tremble. Unable to speak with his bloody mouth, he beckoned her closer. He gently pulled his child from her embrace and kissed him. The blood on his lips left a mark on the infant's cheek. The boy looked at his father, with unspoken pride: *I am the first child in the world to be gifted with a bloody kiss!*

When Nanduvadakaan fainted again, Vanjiammal set off to the Vengai Ponni Amman temple with the child.

Aatha, I am throwing my thali at your feet. You must find an answer to all these atrocities! she begged. The temple resounded with the sworn vow of every Indian woman who had ever been wronged.

The temple doors were open. Inside the garbagraham, Vengai Ponni Amman sat dressed in the new silk sari given by Rathnavathi.

"Do not worry, Vanjiammal. Aatha won't disappoint you," comforted the priest.

Vanjiammal took off her sacred marriage thread and the piece of turmeric that was hung there as a pendant. She snapped the turmeric

in two, dropped it at the feet of the idol, and stood there staring at the goddess, her eyes pools of tears.

Horse hooves sped towards the place where Nanduvadakaan lay unconscious.

"Haiya... Haiya...!" the charioteer shouted to the horses. They were surrounded by a battalion of police.

The chariot halted at Nanduvadakaan's feet, and a white man with blond sideburns got out. He kicked at the prone figure with his toe and scoffed, "Go on...try and yell your 'Vande Mataram' now!"

They were joined by a drunken Vengai Rajan.

"So Durai, are you satisfied now?" he asked, slurring.

"Absolutely!" The white man invited Vengai Rajan to a debaucherous celebration later that night, and then left with his police escort and Nanduvadakaan. Vengai Rajan's horse sped to the temple.

Vishnuchittan paused, choked with tears and horror. Archana stood still as a statue, and next to her Vadivelu was writhing in anger and disgust.

Outside the hut, a group was searching for Archana. "Where's that Madurai girl? Did she come this way? Apparently Rani Valaiyambikai has just died! There is chaos in the palace! How many deaths in just one month's time?"

Since the door was shut, Archana did not hear them.

When the news of Nanduvadakaan's arrest reached her, Vanjiammal took her child in her arms and raced down the mud lane towards the palace. Vengai Rajan's horse appeared in her path and neighed. In spite of Vanjiammal's grief, her striking beauty drew Vengai Rajan's lustful eye once again.

The liquor coursing through his bloodstream erased any lingering sense of propriety, shame, pride, justice, decency or balance. Sexual hunger won out over everything that was human in him.

"Your husband has gone forever. Now I am the only man you have," he leered. He drew his chain of pearls to his lips and began to suck on one of them, his eyes never leaving her.

Vanjiammal turned around and ran back down the path. She came to a halt at the saffron-painted temple walls. The child in her arms began to scream in fear.

Hearing the commotion, the priest peeked over the wall. He saw Vanjiammal come running into the temple compound, chased by Vengai Rajan on his horse.

"Fearing my wife's rebuke, I never touched you," yelled Vengai Rajan. "I kept away only because I wanted her sister to marry my brother. But now it seems that woman has sworn she will have nothing more to do with this samasthanam. So there is nothing left to stop me. I swear, from now till the day I die, I will have my way with as many women as I possibly can...starting with you!" And with that, he leapt from the horse and sprang upon her.

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Quickly she struggled free of Vengai Rajan's grasp and ran into the garbagraham. In his drunkenness, Vengai Rajan followed her.

The priest gaped at them. "Raja...please don't..." The priest's whispered warning was lost in the wind.

Vanjiammal tried to huddle behind the idol. But that was not going to stop the beast. He dragged her out. The child slipped from her arms and fell at the goddess's feet. Vanjiammal's sari was ripped off and came flying over the idol, draping over the priest as he bent down to pick up the child.

"Amma!" Vanjiammal's cry for help rang through the temple. Her weakened body was unable to throw off Vengai Rajan.

The priest ran to his hut with the child.

"Please come and help!" he cried. "The raja is molesting Vanjiammal in the temple! Please come! Hurry!"

The Noorukudi swarmed from their huts like an army of ants. They thundered down the mud lane through the bushes towards the temple. Dust rose and blocked out the sky. However, when the angry mob reached the temple, Vanjiammal's body—now draped in the deity's

green silk sari—was hanging from the bell-rope, swinging the clapper from left to right.

Da-nang! Da-nang! Da-nang!

The priest froze in shock. He placed the weeping child under the bell-rope and knelt on the floor. There was no end to the tears and sobs of the crowd. And yet not one opened his mouth to condemn the raja.

Fear!

The news reached Nanduvadakaan, still in police custody. In a frenzy, he overpowered his captors and escaped.

The police swarmed around the temple, hoping to arrest him when he arrived to claim his dead wife.

But he never did. Not even as the hot tongues of red flame from the funeral pyre claimed the body of Vanjiammal.

"I hear Nanduvadakaan is hiding up in the Chathuragiri mountains," Thandavan informed Vengai Rajan.

"I have to catch him, Thandavan. Or else the white durai will never respect me again!"

"That's true, of course. He's furious. He wants your head..."

Vengai Rajan roared with scornful laughter.

"He wants *my* head, does he?"

"Raja, he is seething. Please be careful!"

Even before Thandavan could finish this utterance, a dagger flew into the room, as if out of nowhere. Vengai Rajan caught sight of it from the corner of his eye and threw Thandavan into its path at the last second. Thandavan fell to the ground, dead.

Nanduvadakaan was hiding behind a pillar.

The raja started screaming for help. Servants rushed in. Nanduvadakaan tore open the silk curtains and escaped through the window.

Simma Rajan came charging in to his brother's aid. At the top of his voice, loud enough to make the palace quake, he challenged: "I shall not stop till I have ripped Nanduvadakaan to ribbons!"

"Thambi, we cannot let him win," whined Vengai Rajan.

The brothers announced a reward of ten acres of fertile land to anyone who brought them Nanduvadakaan's head.

"What will follow this disaster?" fretted Rathnavathi.

"Oh Rani," pleaded Sivakozhundhu, the karwar, "the royal family is going to the dogs. Poor Nanduvadakaan! How they tortured him! They have taken Vanjiammal's life already. Now not even God can save this household."

"Where is Nanduvadakaan now?"

"He is hiding in the Chathuragiri mountains. I am told Kuzhandhaisami knows where his hideout is. Nanduvadakaan is surely plotting revenge."

Simma Rajan overheard this and clapped the karwar on his back. The karwar was completely shaken.

"Bring Kuzhandhaisami at once," Simma Rajan ordered.

When Kuzhandhaisami arrived, Simma Rajan tossed a brass plate at his feet.

"Read what is written on that plate!"

"I don't know how to read, Raja."

The plate was given to the karwar, who read it out in a trembling tone.

"On this plate, the head of Nanduvadakaan, swadeshi and traitor to the State of Kottaipuram, having been torn from his body, shall be carried in procession throughout the Samasthanam. By order of the Raja, the head shall be displayed so that every Noorukudi may view it, and then it shall be buried along with this plate. This plate shall be carried by Kuzhandhaisami, keeper of the stables; in return, he shall be rewarded with ten acres of fertile land and one hundred coconut trees."

"Do you know where Nanduvadakaan is hiding?" demanded Simma Rajan.

Kuzhandhaisami stayed silent.

"Your silence is answer enough. You must chop off his head and bring it to me on this plate. If you do it, I will do better than give you ten acres. I shall give you a whole coconut grove and a post in the palace!"

Kuzhandhaisami looked at him, greed slowly changing his expression.

"You will become a *diwan* of this samasthanam!"

"Raja! Do you mean it?"

"Perform this task and then return to me!"

It was close to sunset in the dense forest on the slopes of the Chathuragiri mountains. Packs of jackals had emerged, howling in chorus. Kuzhandhaisami was slowly moving up the path worn into the hills over the ages by the Palingar tribals. He carried a small brass bucket containing fish curry and rice.

Nanduvadakaan, reclining on a tree branch, saw him with the bucket and clambered down. He looked at him with tearful eyes, and hugged him.

"Nanduvadakaan, how is your mouth wound?"

Not bad, Nanduvadakaan signed.

"I've brought you some fish curry and rice. The white durai and the two rajas are scouring the forest for you. Be careful!"

Suddenly there was a rustle. They could hear the frenzied bark of a wild dog. Out of the bushes raced young Vishnuchittan, who crashed into them.

"Dey! What's your hurry, kid?"

"I wanted to see Nanduvadakaan Anna. So I followed you here..."

"Stupid idiot! This is a dangerous jungle. Are you really so brave, or just plain silly?" snapped Kuzhandhaisami. Nanduvadakaan, however, drew the child in close for a tight hug.

Then he eagerly opened the bucket and ate. As he was engrossed in the food, Kuzhandhaisami moved behind him with a sharp dagger...

Dhoom... Dhoom... the palace drums boomed with loud and irregular rhythms. People ran excitedly out of their huts—even Veera Nadar, who had withdrawn into spirituality at a very young age.

"Nanduvadakaan has been murdered!" cried a woman, pointing into the distance. There was his head, held high on a brass plate.

"Kuzhandhaisami killed him. This is meant as a warning of what will happen to us if ever we dare to oppose the rajas or the white men."

Crying aloud, "Aatha, Vengai Ponni..." a man fell faint.

Many wept bitter tears. However, no one dared to raise a whimper in protest—except Pandikarrupar, Vanjiammal's grandfather.

"Aiyyo... what will I do in this old age? I am unable to bear these heinous crimes," he ranted. "Is there no soul here with any shred of honour? Are we even human at all?"

Kuzhandhaisami was given a royal welcome when he returned to the palace. The celebration was unending.

Simma Rajan toasted his success and formally appointed him as diwan.

"Raja..." said Karwar Sivakozhundhu.

"Yes, Karwar?'

"You are invited for dinner at the white durai's bungalow. He has sent his chariot to bring you."

"Is everyone ready to leave?"

"Yes, everyone except you."

"Give me a moment." Quickly, Simma Rajan dressed himself in silk and jewels. At the front door, he met a despondent Rathnavathi.

"What is it, Anni?"

"Please say no to the dinner! Let us go to the temple instead. Today is your thirtieth birthday."

"Is that right? Then it is Anna's birthday as well. I forgot."

"He, too, wants to go for the dinner. He is your twin brother; please ask him to come to the temple."

"You go to the temple if you want. This dinner, and our friendship with the durais, is important. Today we have successfully done away with that rogue Nanduvadakaan. We must celebrate!"

After more unsuccessful pleading, a tired Rathnavathi left for the temple on her own. The rajas left with their sons for the dinner.

En route, their path was blocked by a fallen tree. Vengai Rajan ordered the charioteer to take the forest path. The charioteer hesitated.

"Raja...there are too many wild animals on that route."

But Vengai Rajan was adamant.

The chariot had barely started down the path when they encountered two hungry leopards!

The puja at Vengai Ponni Amman temple that evening was very impressive. Surprisingly, the Noorukudis—who were usually always present—were not there. The priest looked distressed.

"What is troubling you? You are very quiet," observed Rathnavathi.

"I do not have the stomach to discuss these recent events, oh Rani."

Rathnavathi sighed. "What can I do?" she said. "I am only a woman."

Just then, a group of people came racing into the temple. "Rani, Rani... The rajas have been killed by leopards!"

A huge crowd, carrying torches and drums to scare away other animals, went in search of the bodies. They found Vengai Rajan and Simma Rajan torn to pieces. Fortunately, the raja's sons were not badly hurt.

"It is Vanjiammal's curse!" murmured the crowd, well within Rathnavathi's hearing.

She lacked the strength even to weep. She could only look blankly at the sky.

"So that was the beginning of the decline of Kottaipuram?" Archana asked.

Vishnuchittan nodded.

"What happened to Viruchigamani, Vanjiammal's son?"

"He was brought up by our people, with a certain amount of apprehension and fear. He had to live with the stigma that clings to a child whose parents die so soon after his birth.

"Yet Rani Rathnavathi did not think of him this way. The rajas' deaths changed her greatly. She put the green silk sari back in the bamboo box, kept it in the garbagraham, and worshipped it. She felt that it was Vanjiammal's curse which had made her a widow. She hoped that by praying to the sari that Vanjiammal wore in death, she could save future generations from the curse. But that hope was proven futile."

"What do you mean? How?"

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The news of Valaiyambikai's death was doing its rounds in the Noorukudi village, but most of the people were away in the open maidan next to the Vengai Ponni Amman temple, busy with the festivities. Only the old and the frail were left behind in the huts.

Unaware of what had happened, Vishnuchittan continued his tale. Archana listened eagerly, and Vadivelu stood by as well, stock-still.

"When Viruchigamani was fifteen, his great-grandfather Pandikarrupar died. The boy had grown up to be wild and tough, spending most of his time in the jungle. He used to catch scorpions with his bare hands and trap even the most venomous of snakes. He would walk around with a snake twined around his neck and a jackal on a leash.

"Almost every woman in the settlement was terribly frightened of him—except one, who was deeply in love with him."

"Really? Who was that, Thatha?"

"The current maharani—Pandiammal."

"My god! Then why didn't Viruchigamani marry her?"

"Again, it was that bastard Kuzhandhaisami."

"I don't get it."

"Once, his job had been to feed hay to the horses in the palace stables. After he murdered Nanduvadakaan, he was made the diwan. The power and authority went to his head. He started throwing his weight around like he was a raja himself. Except with Rani Rathnavathi—he behaved himself around her."

"Thatha...please. Tell me about Rathnavathi later. First, I want know everything about Viruchigamani and his romance."

"Of course, I will tell you..."

There was a long drought, and many of the ponds and wells of the region had dried up—including all the wells of the samasthanam. Pandiammal was on her way through the woods carrying a pot to fetch water, thorns pricking her feet. Suddenly, crouching on a branch above her, she saw an angry, ravenous leopard. Pandiammal was scared to the roots of her hair.

Then there was the sound of horse hooves. It was the royal heirs: Indra Rajan and Chandra Rajan, Rathnavathi's sons—grown men now, having taken wives of their own. The two brothers were out for a hunt.

"Raja, please save me!" Pandiammal's fearful scream caught their attention. It alerted the leopard as well.

Chandra Rajan aimed his gun and fired a shot. Unfortunately, it missed the animal and bored through the branch. The wary cat jumped down and ran off.

Pandiammal turned to them, folding her palms gratefully. But both men were staring fixedly at her youthful beauty. She could feel their licentious eyes crawling over her body like beetles.

"What is your name?" Chandra Rajan asked.

"Pandiammal..."

"A name which speaks of courage. So, what are you going to give us for saving you from the leopard?"

"We are already your slaves. What can I give you?"

"Chandra," interrupted Indra Rajan, "let's tell the diwan to get her ready for the prasadham. That'll be a good way to find out what she might be able to give us..." With a laugh, they kicked their horses and rode off.

Pandiammal was appalled. She had heard of the tradition of prasadham, but she had assumed the practice had died with the previous generation. Now it seemed to be starting all over again—with herself as the first victim!

Viruchigamani walked up to the spot where Vishnuchittan, now a young man, was working. He held a pack of jackals on leashes, and the monitor lizard on his shoulder flicked its double-edged tongue at Vishnuchittan.

"Viruchigamani, where are you off to with your army of jackals and monitor lizards?

"Who is there to love me, Vishnu, except these creatures?"

"What about me?"

"Yes, it's thanks to people like you that I'm even here. I would have had a better life if my mother had survived."

"It was destiny; we cannot change it," said Vishnuchittan. "The maharani has ordered me to work at the palace, starting tomorrow."

"You be very careful around her sons, okay?"

"I don't need to fear; Rani Rathnavathi is there."

"Good! Then I shall leave."

"How long can you go on without any work?"

"As long as I can manage. When I can't manage any longer, I shall die."

"Idiot! You should be brave, like your father. The fearlessness you show with your jackals and scorpions—you should use that same fearlessness to confront the diwan. He's the one who killed your father, and paraded his severed head on a plate around the village."

"Him?"

"If I went on and told you the whole story about how your mother hanged herself, even your pet jackals would weep. You can't go on being so carefree; you should demand justice!"

Vishnuchittan's words horrified Viruchigamani. He let go of the pack of jackals, and they ran off into the woods. The monitor lizard climbed up a tree.

The veins of Viruchigamani's broad shoulders throbbed. Revenge painted his eyes with red.

Suddenly they heard a woman scream.

"Who's that?" the two men asked together, and climbed up a tree to look. Not far off, they saw Pandiammal cringing in fear of the leopard, who had returned after the two lecherous rajas had ridden off. Viruchigamani leapt nimbly from tree to tree until he was face to face with the beast. It raised its front paws and sprang.

There was an enormous struggle. At one point, it looked as if the animal was going to tear Viruchigamani limb from limb. But just then Pandiammal snatched Vishnuchittan's sickle away from him, and drove it into the creature's back. The beast slid off of Viruchigamani and fell dead on the ground. Viruchigamani rose to his feet and stared at her; she lowered her eyes.

Who is the braver of these two? Vishnuchittan wondered.

The young pair's gratitude towards each other soon became friendship, and grew into love. They decided to wed on an auspicious day.

When Vishnuchittan told Rathnavathi about it, she was truly happy for them. "Vanjiammal's son is getting married? Good, maybe now he'll start acting more responsibly."

"Maharani, his life was ruined by the royals of this palace. Please, can you do something to help him?"

"I will. Let them be married; the first gifts will come from the palace."

True to her word, she sent her gifts on a silver plate, wrapped in silk cloth.

The young rajas had not forgotten Pandiammal's beauty, and were enraged that she was now getting married. They beckoned Kuzhandhaisami.

"What's wrong with our old hag of a mother? Why is she sending gifts for Pandiammal's marriage?"

"All the traditions are being turned on their head!" said Kuzhandhaisami. "It is the slaves who should be giving gifts to you!"

"I agree. We must demand their tribute—and we must demand that Pandiammal comes for the royal prasadham."

"I shall try my best," said Kuzhandhaisami. "Which of the two of you wants to go first?"

"Let my elder brother Indra Rajan go first. Make sure our mother and our wives don't find out about this beforehand."

Kuzhandhaisami left without another word. But when he brought their demands to Pandiammal, she became livid.

"Never! I shall go to the maharani for justice."

The next day, she came to the palace alone. Kuzhandhaisami met her.

"Why are you here?"

"None of your business."

"I'll make it my business," he said scornfully, grabbing hold of her. Then he roughly hustled her into a room and shut the door. Inside was Chandra Rajan!

Vishnuchittan chanced to see the diwan pushing Pandiammal into the room. He rushed to Rani Rathnavathi. The dowager, who had been quite ill, was still running a high fever; nonetheless, her body shook in anger, and she set off at once through the corridors.

She ran to the door of the room and banged on it in a frenzy until it finally opened. Inside was Indra Rajan, his sexual hunger sated—and Pandiammal, with not an inch of cloth covering her body.

"The terrible sin that I prayed would never again disgrace this palace has now been committed once again! I had hoped you, my sons, would not have the same depraved blood as your father. I refuse to be merely a witness to this crime. Something must be done!"

She stormed back to her chamber and called for Devar.

"Maharani, what is the problem?" he asked, as he entered.

"My sons no longer obey me, Devar. Because of Vanjiammal's wrath, I lost my husband. Now who knows what terrible curse Pandiammal's anger will bring upon us?"

Devar thought for a long time. Then he asked, "What have you decided?"

"From this moment onwards, Pandiammal will be my daughter-in-law. She will have equal power in this palace. All its wealth shall be hers!"

"Perhaps you can make her your daughter-in-law, Maharani," Devar said in a quiet voice. "But you cannot bequeath to her the palace and all its wealth. That belongs only to your sons."

"Bring Pandiammal here. A woman should remove her sari for only one man, and that man should be her husband!"

"But what about Viruchigamani, the man she loves?"

"Love is not as important as chastity and honour, Devar!"

"Will Indra Rajan consent?"

"I will *make* him consent. If he does not, I shall kill myself!"

Rathnavathi's threat had its desired effect.

Indra Rajan reluctantly tied the thali around Pandiammal's neck, while his first wife looked on, fuming at being forced to share her status

as the rani. For the first time, the Noorukudi watched a royal wedding with pride—though Pandiammal herself was full of shame.

She had been forced in the name of honour to wed Indra Rajan. How would Viruchigamani react to the spurning of his love?

"What happened to Viruchigamani?" Archana asked Vishnuchittan, who was still lying on his back relating the story.

"The rajas' transgressions became worse and worse. Rani Rathnavathi could battle them no more; she had become too old and frail. Pandiammal and the other two ranis all became pregnant. Indra Rajan already had a son who was two years old," said Vishnuchittan, and began sobbing.

"Why are you crying now, Thatha?"

"That was when the worst offences started. The other ranis couldn't tolerate the fact that a slave girl had been given equal status with them. Without giving Rathnavathi a clue, they tortured Pandiammal incessantly. They went so far as to try to kill her child before it was even born. Once they heated a sword, dipped it in *yercum* milk, and tried slashing her stomach…"

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"My god!" Archana gasped, agitated.

"Fortunately Pandiammal escaped death, and so did her daughter. But it might have been better for that girl if she had died then."

"What do you mean, Thatha?"

"The people of the palace did not even think of the girl as human. Her own father, Indra Rajan, treated her like dirt. Unbeknownst to Rathnavathi, Pandiammal was kept imprisoned in the stable. The newborn girl was not even allowed to drink her mother's milk. They starved her to death."

"Where was Devar when all this was happening?"

"He was there among us, just watching, not saying a word in protest. It seemed the only smart thing to do. If anyone had spoken up, every Noorukudi woman would have had to endure what Pandiammal was

going through. Around that time, I lost my job in the palace, and was sent packing with a hundred and eight lashes."

"Why were you whipped?"

"I was whipped many times. Once, because I gave water to Pandiammal in the stable when she was thirsty. Another time, because I gave a dirty look to that diwan, Kuzhandhaisami. Aside from all that, the reason they threw me out was that I provoked Viruchigamani against the palace."

"What happened to him, anyway?"

"Indra Rajan came up with a new ruse. He accused Viruchigamani of having an illicit affair with Pandiammal. Rathnavathi refused to believe it, though. Since she was the only one who knew where the priceless jewels and diamonds were hidden, her sons could not openly defy her. That treasure was worth crores even then."

"Who has them now?"

"They are still there in the palace. Not even Pandiammal knows where. When Devar told Rathnavathi that her property had to go to her sons, she immediately hid the entire fortune in a secret place somewhere in the palace."

"Didn't she tell anyone where?"

"Not that I know of."

"Let's go back. If Pandiammal was so abused, how is it that she's so respected and feared today?"

"That was the effect of Vanjiammal's curse. On his thirtieth birthday, when Indra Rajan went for his celebration hunt, a tree branch fell on him and he died on the spot. When we went to collect the body, a Noorukudi woman became possessed by Vanjiammal's spirit.

"'It is I who killed him!' she said. 'I will not spare any of the male heirs from now on!'

"Every woman, including Rathnavathi and her daughters-in-law, fell at her feet and begged for mercy.

"Then, speaking through the woman, Vanjiammal proclaimed: 'I will spare only a male heir with pure morals—one who lives through the first thirty years of his life without ever committing a sin. Until then, all you

women must worship the bamboo box in which my sari is kept. But none of you shall open it! If anyone dares to do so, she will instantly perish! Only a girl child born to the royal family can open that box without fear—but on account of the transgressions of this family, no such girl child shall be born, or if born, she will not survive long. Hear this: There will be no more slavery in this samasthanam!'"

"And after that, did the sons finally change their ways?"

"Ha! Do you think those scoundrels had any fear of god or ghost? The younger son, Chandra Rajan, was the worst. He, too, died when he turned thirty—because his horse ran amok. It was only after that that people started believing in Vanjiammal's curse. The other wives were too scared to go on torturing Pandiammal, and they finally began treating her with deference. The box was now considered a divine treasure, and was taken to the palace, where the women worshipped it. That was Veera Nadar's idea—one which won him a good deal of respect."

"Didn't Vanjiammal's ghost take mercy on *any* of the heirs?"

"No, and none of them deserved it, either. Each of them had one wife in the palace and kept several other women outside it. If Vanjiammal had not been born in our community, they would have gone on treating us worse than dogs."

"What happened to Kuzhandhaisami and Viruchigamani?"

"Kuzhandhaisami was found dead somewhere—decapitated. His head was never found. The rumour was that Viruchigamani did it, but I never believed that. I know Viruchigamani became a freedom fighter, like his father Nanduvadakaan; he joined Netaji's force and went to prison. He died there.

"And so now you know the story. There is no more to tell."

After listening to the long story, Archana was drained. She gave Vadivelu a look; they said good-bye to Vishnuchittan and left the hut. They heard a jackal howling in the distance. The sound made Archana think of Viruchigamani.

"Madam," said Vadivelu, "I'm not sure Viruchigamani is dead."

"I was thinking the same thing," replied Archana.

Though they were surrounded by darkness, they could see the lights of the palace in the distance. They walked towards it, enjoying the cool breeze, still blissfully unaware of Valaiyambikai's death.

"So we've finally established that this whole 'curse' business is part of a grand scheme," observed Archana. "But we still don't know who the mastermind behind it is. There is obviously a long line of operators, over generations. Their thirst for vengeance has still not abated."

They were walking up the main path towards the palace, flanked by fan palms, when they heard a conch blow—the signal of a death.

"What? Another death!" Archana entered the durbar; she was greeted by the stiff body of Valaiyambikai. Divyamangalam and Pandiammal sat beside her, grieving.

Archana felt as though a thick needle had been jabbed into her spine. As she sank beside a pillar, a horde of people ran past. A balled-up piece of paper dropped next to her.

Despite her weariness, she unrolled it.

Woman, now you have ruined everything! Visu is inside the ring of death. Not even God can save Kottaipuram now! Seven of us have sworn an oath in blood; if one of us misses, then the next will get him. In a few moments, the first of us will take aim.

Though I could never bring myself to hate this young raja, I still stand by my oath.

The Keeper of the Pledge

Archana felt like she had been bathed in acid. She crumpled the paper as her eyes swiftly scanned the room for Visu. He was standing next to Devar, by Valaiyambikai's prone body.

He saw her and walked over.

"What happened, Visu?"

"I don't know! Maybe Anni had a heart attack. And I'm worried about Vasanthi too."

"What do you mean?"

"She had an electric shock—she's being treated now. It all happened right after they opened that bamboo box. Whoever our opponents are, they're definitely very smart. What about your mission? Were you successful?"

"Partly. Now I know the reasons behind everything, but not the person responsible. But I don't care about that now, Visu! Your life is in danger!" She showed him the crumpled letter. Devar walked over to them.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Aiya, I won't beat around the bush. There's a huge conspiracy going on here. Valaiyambikai was murdered!"

"Shh...!" Devar warned, trying to silence her with a stern finger.

Visu turned to him. "You can shush her later, Devar. I'm telling you, this is all a conspiracy—it's just that we still don't know who to suspect. I can't believe the truth has escaped you for so many years!"

Shattered by Visu's outburst, Devar tried to lead them into a more private room. But they were stopped by a crowd bearing a huge garland, which they extended to Visu.

"Raja, we have woven this garland from the flowers in your garden. Please, place it on your anni's body."

There were two snakes threaded through the flowers.

Even before Archana could notice them, Visu had taken the garland.

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"Visu!" Archana yelled, and smacked the garland from his hand. The two slim snakes slithered out and crept away.

Divyamangalam and Pandiammal nearly fainted.

"Thillainayagam!" Devar called out. "Take the men who brought the garland to my room."

"Just what is going on here, Devar?" demanded Pandiammal.

"Please bear with me, Maharani. Let me make inquiries. You two come over here," he said to Visu and Archana. He took them into a room and shut the door.

"Now tell me. How are you convinced this is a plot?" asked Devar. "Young lady, you are a stranger here. Do not make hasty accusations."

"I don't trust anyone here anymore!" Visu burst out. "You tell me. Why am I given only thirty years to live?"

"Aiyyo... Raja! Do you suspect *me*? I don't have any clue what you are talking about. Out of the blue, you are alleging that these deaths are murders!"

"Of course they are," said Archana. "Including Valaiyambikai's! We have to know why she was killed. Was it because she opened the bamboo box?"

"What?! She opened the bamboo box? When?"

"Yes, Devar! And we know what was inside."

Devar was totally shaken. "Wh-what was it?"

"We'll come to that later. Right now Visu is in danger!" Archana cried.

"I don't care if I lose my life," said Visu. "But we have to find out who the killer is. I won't die until then."

"Devar...you must not allow Valaiyambikai to be cremated until there is an autopsy. Then what we say will be proven. Visu, how is Vasanthi?"

"Let's go check on her," Devar answered, and he took them to the room where she was resting. There were a few women taking care of her. Karwar Karunakaran was supervising.

"How is she, Karwar?"

"She's out of danger. The doctor was here just now."

Archana went up to Vasanthi and held her, comfortingly. Softly, she called her name. "Vasanthi?"

Very slowly, she opened her eyes.

"Don't worry, Vasanthi. You're safe. The police will be here soon."

"What? The police?" asked the karwar.

"Yes, Mr. Karunakaran. We have discovered that the whole curse is a staged drama—"

"A drama!"

"Yes...no time to explain. Take good care of Vasanthi, please."

The three went back to Devar's room, where Archana gave him a blow-by-blow account, from what she had overheard on the telephone up to the crumpled note.

"I don't know if I can believe this," Devar gasped, once she had finished. "Let's talk to the men who brought the garland."

Just then, Thillainayagam entered. "Sorry, sir. I could not catch them," he whined. "They escaped."

"Don't worry, Devar," said Archana. "I saw the two men in the stable. If I can locate them, we will solve the mystery."

"Should I line up all the Noorukudi men?"

"No. We might catch those two, but the mastermind would get away. Let me mingle among the crowd and spot them. Thillainayagam, come with me."

Archana moved among the mourners but could not find the two men. Just as she was losing hope, she recognized the inquisitive press reporter. She walked up to him.

"When did you come in?"

"Just this evening."

"Can you do me an urgent favour?"

"Sure!"

She whispered into his ears. Thillainayagam, seeing this, looked displeased.

As the reporter walked off, another group entered the main hall, with Veera Nadar at its head. Along with them was one of the men Archana had been looking for.

"Thillainayagam, that's one of them!" she whispered, pointing. As Thillainayagam neared him…

"You are looking for something?"

"Yes, Vadivelu," replied Visu. He had found Vadivelu and brought him back to his own room. "I'm looking for the will I hid when Vasanthi had the electric shock."

He found the paper and eagerly unfolded it.

He struggled to read the archaic Tamil.

To whosoever may read this, be it man or woman—Rani Rathnavathi wishes the best. Greetings! Whether this bamboo box has been opened in a search for redemption, or simply out of curiosity, I would like to state that it is a fake; there is no supernatural power here.

I myself opened the box only after the deaths of my husband, my brother-in-law, and both my sons. I had nothing more to lose. I opened it in the hope that at least my grandson might survive past the age of thirty. That is when I discovered that everything had been staged.

Viruchigamani, son of Vanjiammal, sought revenge on our family. It was he who killed my sons and placed their fingers in this box. So too did he place the head of the diwan, Kuzhandhaisami. The Noorukudi then staged a dance of spirit possession, where I was told that redemption could only come from a girl child. I was fool enough to believe that the whole thing was part of the curse!

Once I opened the box, I saw through their game; but now I am unable to tell anyone what I have learned. The moment they realized that I had seen the contents, I was imprisoned in a room. I had no way to meet Devar, the Rajaguru; nor Veera Nadar, the Noorukudi soothsayer; nor my daughters-in-law. When they captured me, they took the key to the hidden safe where the daily-wear jewellery is kept. But there is yet another safe, in a hidden passage, where I have stashed away the most precious jewels and diamonds, including the diamond-studded crown which was part of my own dowry, and the testament of the samasthanam. Still they are trying to get me to give up that key.

Today I discovered the secret passage from the room where I am imprisoned to the puja room. And so I write this note. Only Vengai Ponni Amman knows the pain I went through to get the paper, quill, and ink.

The end is closing in. But I shall never reveal the location of the hidden treasure to the schemers. If the Goddess has any power, may She let the one who finally defeats these evil men find it for himself.

I am sure I will not die a natural death, either. If I am not murdered, I may take my own life.

But I pray this: That henceforth every woman on earth shall be respected and worshipped as a goddess. I pray that slavery will be abolished from the face of this earth. Woman is Pride, Woman is God, Woman is All!

My blessings, unto everyone.

Rathnavathi
18.4.1932

"This is my great-grandmother's letter, Vadivelu," said Visu. "She says the mastermind is Viruchigamani!"

"Archana Madam also thought the same," replied Vadivelu.

"She was wrong," declared Devar, entering the room with Archana. "Viruchigamani died fifty years ago, in prison. I collected the body myself. I even conducted his funeral, at Pandiammal's request."

Visu could only stare at him.

"Not to worry, Visu," said Archana. "We'll soon know who the brain behind all this is… when we question this one!" Thillainayagam came in, dragging the man Archana had seen in the stable. They were followed by Pandiammal and Divyamangalam.

As they stood, eagerly waiting for his explanation, from behind a pillar, a pistol fitted with a silencer was being aimed at Visu's forehead.

The trigger was pulled; the bullet travelled, beating the laws of sound and light…

Blood spurted forth!

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Devar fell to the floor in a pool of blood. Having seen the pistol from the corner of his eye, he had thrust his head in front of Visu's at the last second, and taken the bullet himself.

Visu stood, petrified.

The man who had pulled the trigger took to his heels and sprinted out onto the portico—where he was slammed by the police jeep that was just speeding in. He was thrown up into the air and fell back to the ground.

Rushing to the front door, Archana cried, "Arrest him, Inspector!"

The inspector got out of the jeep and ordered the unconscious man to be taken in. He was followed by the press reporter.

Pandiammal looked at the Devar's lifeless body. She had lost a good friend—almost a brother. Her eyes pooled.

"Will someone please tell me what is going on here?" Divyamangalam demanded.

Archana came back in with the inspector. "Athai, please be calm," she said. "I shall explain everything. Let the police finish with their formalities."

In a little while, two more police vans from Crime Branch and Forensics arrived. Devar and Valaiyambikai's bodies were taken for autopsy.

Smelling a juicy story, reporters thronged the palace compound, clicking photographs of Archana and the rest at will. At the palace gates, the Noorukudis stood staring, barred from entering by the police.

The murderer was tortured in police custody, but carefully, so that no wounds would show.

As the matter was of high importance, he was surrounded by ranking police officials.

The media, which had earlier covered Kottaipuram for the strange thirty-year curse, now mobbed the Crime Branch, once everyone realized that it had been a conspiracy all along.

The Vauxhall bearing the samasthanam's yellow flag drove into the Crime Branch compound. Mallaya, the driver, opened the rear door, and Visu and Archana got out. A police inspector ran out to welcome them.

"What have you learned, Inspector?"

"He is very adamant. We have beaten him soundly; still, he refuses to say anything coherent, except that he has faced much worse as a slave of the palace in days long past. Clearly this is an act of vengeance."

"We know that already. Anything else?"

"He keeps mumbling some old stories about people named Nanduvadakaan and Vanjiammal. We start on one and nine others pour out. Even the superintendent is bewildered…"

In the interrogation room, the murderer sat on a chair with his hands bound behind his back, almost unconscious with pain.

"What is this, sir?"

"What do you mean, what is this? Even after all this beating, he refuses to confess his guilt. He's threatening to hold his breath and die, madam."

Archana approached him, knelt before him, and looked into his eyes.

He glared back and growled, "I feared this would happen when I saw you for the first time."

"Even now, I don't hate you," said Archana said, gently. "I even believe there was some warped sense of justice behind your actions. Vishnuchittan told me about the terrible arrogance of the old rajas."

He studied her beauty and the gentleness in her tone. She looked as pretty as a parrot that had opened its red beak to caw.

"I, too, was a victim of that arrogance," he said softly.

"I don't understand."

"The stories about Nanduvadakaan and Vanjiammal are common knowledge. But my own plight is not so well known…"

"What happened to you?"

"Why do you care?" the murderer snapped back. "I don't need your pity. I know that I'm going to be hanged. Let them go ahead and get it over with!"

"The law wants to know why you committed so many murders, and it's even more important to me. Shouldn't the future heirs of the samasthanam learn to be humble? Please. Tell me."

Unable to hold his past inside any longer, he started to weep. He had not shed a tear when he was beaten—and now he cried! Everyone around them stood watching, surprised.

He had receded into memory; he was back with his parents and sister. Speaking quietly, the murderer began his tale…

I must have been nine when Indra Rajan married Pandiammal. Viruchigamani was boiling with rage about losing his love. That same day, my elder sister, Poovathaal, came of age. The custom then was to send word to the palace, and they would send a hundred measures of rice. We would make *paal appam* with that rice, and only then spread the word to others. After that, either the maternal uncle or the cross-cousin—the preferred groom for the girl—would weave a mat of green palm fronds and bathe her.

The girl would then be taken to the Vengai Ponni Amman temple, and then to Rani Rathnavathi to receive her blessing. The mother accompanied the girl on this trip.

The entire town had gathered at my house for the function. Her maternal uncle, who had already decided to wed her, was there. He wanted the alliance settled. My sister was deeply in love with him. When he openly expressed his wish, the elders agreed at once.

The skies, too, opened up in happiness. It poured. In the house, they began serving a huge feast with mutton curry. In a separate room, Poovathaal was being dressed. My mother wrapped the new Glasgow muslin *dhavani* over my sister's plump breasts and kissed her forehead. Some more women joined her. They plaited her long hair with screw pine leaves, and they put a gold *rakodi* on top of the braid and a pottu on her forehead. She looked like a goddess.

The womenfolk left with her to receive the rani's blessings. They beat clay pot drums and lit incense. Poovathaal stepped out of the house for the first time as a woman, her head bent to the ground. I accompanied them in my new veshti, still a young boy.

Dhoom! Dhoom! Dhoom! Dhoom!

"A girl of silk is coming! Make way, bless this new woman with a gift of flowers!"

Dhoom! Dhoom!

The air rang with the melodious voices of the women's folk song.

The young raja, Chandra Rajan, watched the whole procession from his window, holding his wine glass, his eyes pinned on my sister. He asked the servant what was going on, and was told about the new woman coming for the maharani's blessings. He immediately called for the diwan, Kuzhandhaisami.

"Diwan! Who is that?"

"A new woman, beautiful like a flower!"

"That's all fine, but if the old woman dares to give her anything, you'll have to pay for it. Ask her just to come and take her blessings and get out."

The diwan was confused. He had thought that at the very least, the raja would have had his pleasure with the girl, and here he was being stingy with gifts.

"Raja, you cannot send your visitors away empty-handed."

"What do you want me to do?"

"At the very least...your prasadham..." Kuzhandhaisami prompted Chandra Rajan.

"But you said she's just come of age."

"So what? If you give your prasadham to a girl on the day she's come of age, you will live a hundred years!"

"Really?"

"I swear it!"

"Then send her in."

"It's new stuff; she might struggle a bit."

"Don't you know me? I'm a master at taming wild horses—as good as Desingh."

When the procession entered the palace, Kuzhandhaisami demanded that Poovathaal come alone to receive Rani Rathnavathi's blessings. But my mother and I insisted on going along.

Inside the room, we found not the maharani, but Chandra Rajan.

Someone shut the doors. They bound my mother's hands, and mine, to a pillar. My sister, realizing what was to follow, tried to run and hide. The raja seemed to enjoy the chase. He pursued her and ripped off her new dhavani while my mother shed silent tears. I was too shocked to even cry. My sister snatched a knife from the fruit plate and yelled, "Don't come near me... Stay away!"

This threw the raja off for a second, but then Kuzhandhaisami pinned my sister's arms from behind. She was forcibly undressed. While I trembled with rage and my mother cried for them to stop, my sister, who had bloomed just that morning, was despoiled by the raja.

Everything was over in a few moments. The beast got off of her, rearranged his clothes, and flung the dhavani on Poovathaal. Even as Kuzhandhaisami was ushering us out of the room, my sister lunged for

the knife on the floor, drove it into her heart, and dropped dead with a final scream. My mother yelled out like a deranged person.

"If you dare go to the old rani for justice," growled the raja, "I shall kill each one of you. Take this bitch's body from my palace. How dare she threaten me with a knife?"

He kicked my sister's body in disgust, while I stared frozen in horror.

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The murderer continued his tale...

Poovathaal's blood trickled out like a snake and wet my feet. Chandra Rajan stalked out of the bedroom.

"Wench," spat Kuzhandhaisami. "Instead of rejoicing in the royal blessing, she kills herself." He clapped and two servants ran in.

"Take this woman's body to her house. If anyone dares to comment on her death, report to me. The raja has ordered for their tongues to be chopped off!"

The men carried my sister away, and I silently guided my mother out. Both our eyes streamed with tears, our hearts tremoring.

My father, who had sent us off in such joy, fell faint at seeing my sister's bloodied body.

In a flash, our house of happiness had changed to a house of death.

When my father asked me what had happened, I explained as best as I could. His eyes turned red in anger.

"Aley...this is the fruit we earn, for slogging for this palace for five generations! I have been an accomplice for the crimes of this raja's father and uncle; this must be my punishment. I cannot stay quiet any longer; I must act! I will become their silent killer!" he swore, gnashing his teeth in rage.

We could hear a chant from outside. *Arohara! Arohara!* There was a group headed on a pilgrimage to Thiruchendur for Kandhar Shashti.

"Today is a holy day—the day Lord Murugan annihilated the *rakshasa* Suran. And today I too swear to annihilate the demons from this palace!"

As my father flung his top cloth over his shoulder, two men came in to offer him their condolences. On one man's back were long scars.

"Brother," he wept to my father, "their oppression has given me my scars, but they made poor Poovathaal into kanji. Is there no redemption for us?"

My father looked at the man with new respect. This man had finally dared to speak aloud the fears of all the rest. My father hugged him and said, "You are the first man among us slaves to think for yourself. Do not despair. My daughter Poovathaal has kindled a flame in me. That fire is blazing! As long as I have the strength and support of the community, I will use my brain to bring about the destruction of Kottaipuram. This is my solemn pledge!"

He got into action at once. As a palace worker, he arranged the celebration hunt for Indra Rajan on his thirtieth birthday. The date, the route they would take, the places where they would spend the night—all were planned by my father.

Along with a few trusted Noorukudis, he planned even more. They cut a heavy branch and tied it to a tree so that it would come loose with a single tug.

As Indra Rajan stood alone under that tree holding his gun, waiting for the deer to be chased towards him by his retinue, an unseen dagger cut the knot and the branch fell, crushing him to death.

My father stood and relished the scene for a while, then raced back to the palace.

There he saw Viruchigamani confronting the diwan. Kuzhandhaisami's cheeks quivered with fear, as though he were strumming on a jaw harp. Viruchigamani's dagger sawed off the diwan's head in just two seconds. He left the body lying on the ground and walked off with the head and one of his fingers. He took them to the spot where his father's head was buried. He dug up the dusty plate, placed Kuzhandhaisami's head and finger on it, walked to the Vengai Ponni Amman temple, and

stood full of pride in front of the idol, offering his kill. Then he opened the bamboo box, placed the head and finger on the sari, and shut the lid. He threw the plate aside and walked back into the woods.

My father saw everything—but in the palace, he only reported Indra Rajan's death.

The entire royal family, along with Maharani Rathnavathi, gathered at the raja's crushed body.

My father had to make the family believe that Indra Rajan's death was due to the curse. It was imperative that no one learned of Kuzhandhaisami's death at that point, lest they make a connection between the two. My father hid Kuzhandhaisami's headless body in the bushes and the plate in the stable. Then he had a woman fake a dance of possession, thereby ensuring that no one would open the bamboo box.

Maharani Rathnavathi became convinced. "Thayi...we have committed so many sins!" she wept, slapping her cheeks frantically. "Please forgive us, and show compassion for this family."

Veera Nadar, fearing that he might lose his status as the Noorukudi soothsayer, swore that Vengai Ponni Amman had appeared in his dream the previous night and told him about the curse. He also advised that the bamboo box be taken from the temple and placed in the palace puja room. My father was relieved.

After four days, Kuzhandhaisami's body was discovered. A month later, Indra Rajan's baby daughter, Devanayagi, died of smallpox. This natural death further convinced everyone that the curse was real. My father remained in the palace, fanning their superstitions further. The samasthanam began treating the newly widowed Pandiammal with reverence and respect.

Chandra Rajan, however, could not change. His pride did not allow him to admit that losing Kuzhandhaisami was a huge blow; he went on acting with his usual arrogance, and my father let him continue—until he turned thirty.

On his birthday, Chandra Rajan was drunk in the morning. He was informed that a virgin girl was waiting for him at the forest rest house.

Driven by lust, he set off on his chariot, not realizing that the axle pin had been removed and replaced with a twig.

As the chariot gathered speed, the twig snapped. The horses ran amok. Chandra Rajan was thrown to the ground and fell unconscious—and then a huge rock was dropped on his head, killing him instantly.

When she learned of the death of her remaining son, the maharani hugged her grandchildren tight and sobbed. No longer fearing for her life, she decided to open the bamboo box.

After she did, two of my father's men, wearing masks, caught her. She was imprisoned in an isolated room, and not allowed to have contact with anyone. Every day, they grilled her for the location of the secret passage and the key that would open it. She refused. Knowing her adamancy would one day expose them, they strangled her. When her eyes bulged and her tongue stuck out, they hung her on a rope and declared her death a suicide.

Devar wanted to know if she had left a note for them. "What was left for her to say, Devar?" the men asked him.

Pandiammal took over as the new maharani, determined to keep the rest of the heirs safe. She had no special interest in claiming the crores of hidden wealth.

Though she was not interested, my father continued to search—and he continued the vengeance killing, as well. When my father died, I took it over myself.

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The murderer paused in his narration. Archana could only stare at him in disbelief. The police surrounding him were staring open-mouthed.

He resumed his tale.

I inherited my father's post after his death. I too took a pledge to continue with the vengeance killing, and to search for the key.

Indra Rajan's son Ramanathan Rupasekaran married Divyamangalam. They had two sons, Gajendran and Visu. His cousin Ranganathan

Rupasekaran remained single. When Visu was a year old, I poisoned his father and made it look like a heart attack. As Viruchigamani had done, I dug up his body and cut off his little finger to put in the box. That was when I saw Rathnavathi's letter inside it. Fortunately for me, it blamed Viruchigamani for every strange death in the palace. Then I knew that even if the conspiracy were exposed, it was he who would be blamed, not us. I took over the watch on the box.

Visu's uncle and Gajendran were also killed on my command, by my men. Both of them were arrogant fools and incorrigible womanizers, so I had no second thoughts about murdering them.

However, all the Noorukudi loved the younger raja, Viswanathan Rupasekaran Kottaipurathaan. Even the youth who were in on the plot were hesitant to hurt him. They thought he, at least, should be spared. That was when you came into our lives, Archana, asking too many questions and making a mess of everything. Before we could finish you off, the media attention had turned on us. This younger generation had to be convinced once more about the curse. That was my priority.

"It was you who killed Gajendran, wasn't it?" demanded Archana.

"Yes. I enlisted the help of a hired thug from Ceylon to do so. And then my trained bull gored the thug to death, as well, so the murders could not be traced back to us. Unfortunately, Noorukudi Irusan was blamed for the snake charmer's death, since he was in charge of the cows. The younger raja stepped in and bailed him out.

"We did get rid of you temporarily, Archana. But Pandikutti, on his deathbed, must have told you about our plans to switch Valaiyambikai's child, and so you returned to the palace. I dropped that plan, and was thinking of letting the child live for a few days before killing it. That way I hoped that you would become convinced about the curse and would leave Visu alone. But…"

"But what?" growled the superintendent.

"Still, neither Visu nor Archana believed that the curse was real. And now Devar was supporting their love affair! I was shocked. If they were to marry before we could get rid of Valaiyambikai's child, the box

would be opened, and our scheme would be ruined. We could not allow Archana to come into the palace as the daughter-in-law. So we hurriedly murdered the baby. But even that didn't scare this woman off!

"That was when things began to change."

"What was the change?" asked the sub-inspector.

"We did not expect the young rani Valaiyambikai to stage a possession dance. That gave a green signal for their love affair. They were ganging up and turning the tables on us; I knew that next, they would go for the bamboo box. So I targeted Visu, Valaiyambikai, and Vasanthi. Valaiyambikai was given vibhuti laced with cyanide. We tampered with an electrical switch, hoping that Visu would touch it; unfortunately, Vasanthi got the shock instead. I had added a strong poison to Visu's cologne, hoping they would use it to get rid of the stench of the severed body parts they had taken from the box. I don't know why they didn't do so.

"Vasanthi had a lucky escape from death. I stood over her bed, pretending to care for her, waiting for an opportunity to finish her off. My men targeted Visu. The first attack was with the garland of snakes, and if that didn't work, they were to use a pistol.

"But all my calculations went wrong.

"Archana spotted the man who was supposed to fire the pistol, and he was nabbed. Then I had to use my own revolver. Devar sacrificed himself to save Visu, and I was caught.

"I don't care what happens to me anymore. I am proud that I carried out my father's brave pledge to the best of my abilities. All things must come to an end. I want to say only this: Let no man treat another as a slave. Let people live free!" With this loud clarion call, he finished his statement.

Soon afterwards, the police rounded up all the loyal members of the murderer's band.

The past few days still seemed unreal to Pandiammal and Divyamangalam. How many strange things had happened! Archana, who had

exposed the whole conspiracy and saved Visu's life, now seemed to them like a goddess.

The other, innocent Noorukudis, who had remained unaware of the plot for so many years, were still in a state of shock. Their elder, Veera Nadar, was full of remorse for having abetted the series of crimes unknowingly.

A new day broke. After many long, tense days, Visu slept soundly through the night and into the morning. Archana took hold of his ear and twisted it gently.

He woke up startled. Fresh from her bath, decked with flowers and a pottu, Archana looked like an *apsara*.

"You can sleep later. We are going to the Vengai Ponni Amman temple. Have you forgotten?"

"Your wish is my command." He grinned at her and rose to get ready.

The royal family was gathered in the durbar.

Pandiammal was peering through her reading glasses at Rathnavathi's letter. Sensing someone next to her, she looked up. There stood Archana and Visu.

"Where are you off to?"

"To the temple."

"Can you do one favour for me? Now, at last, you are going to the temple in peace. Will you wear Vanjiammal's sari?"

"Of course I will!" Archana said, and ran eagerly up the stairs to get it.

Archana took the hundred-year-old sari out of the box. It had a slight stench. Hurriedly, she sprayed it liberally with jasmine perfume.

She shut the door and began to dress herself. As she pleated it, something pricked her palm, and as she tucked the pleats in her waist, she felt something hard and uncomfortable. She undid the sari to examine it… and was in for a surprise!

Embroidered along the golden border of the sari was a tiny key.

She finished dressing herself and returned to the durbar, where Veera Nadar had joined the ranis. He strained his aged eyes at Archana and gasped, "You look like the reincarnation of Vanjiammal herself!"

Archana's father, Kasinathan, had been specially invited for the occasion.

"Athai," Archana said excitedly, "I have found the key to the secret passage!"

Pandiammal looked at the five-cornered star embossed on the key and gasped. There was a similar fresco on one of the walls of the palace's main bedroom! They all hurried there.

"Visu, knock down that star on the wall!"

Visu did—and found a door behind it. Using the key, he unlocked the door. It opened onto a passage. They went down the steps, which were covered with ancient dust. At the end of the stairway was a huge teak trunk. It took all their combined efforts to open it, but the lid finally went up with a loud creak. Visu shone his torchlight into the trunk.

Inside, on a blue silk cloth, were thousands of sparkling diamonds and shining gold jewellery!

They stood around the box gaping at the precious treasure.

They returned to the bedroom, and Visu hugged Archana tight. Aware of their audience, she struggled in his arms.

"Visu...let go! What will everybody think?"

He let go immediately, but his eyes were swimming with tears.

"Hey, what's this? Why these tears now?" she whispered, gently holding his chin.

"Archana, you are a greater wealth to me than all these jewels and diamonds. It is only because of you that I am alive; without you, this samasthanam would have fallen to ruin. It was your courage and intelligence that achieved all of this. I will be grateful to you forever. You are a new sort of woman, the kind the great poet Bharathi dreamed of!

"As compensation for the atrocities of my forefathers, I will use all this wealth for the education and advancement of the Noorukudi. I don't need any more wealth—all I need is you."

The love in Archana's heart now spilled over and brimmed in her eyes. This time, she was the one who pulled him into her arms.

And they held each other so tightly that not even a breeze could steal between them.

In the courtroom, the murderer took the stand. The public prosecutor stood up to begin his questioning. The judge prepared himself to listen to them.

"Sir, tell the court your name," asked the prosecutor.

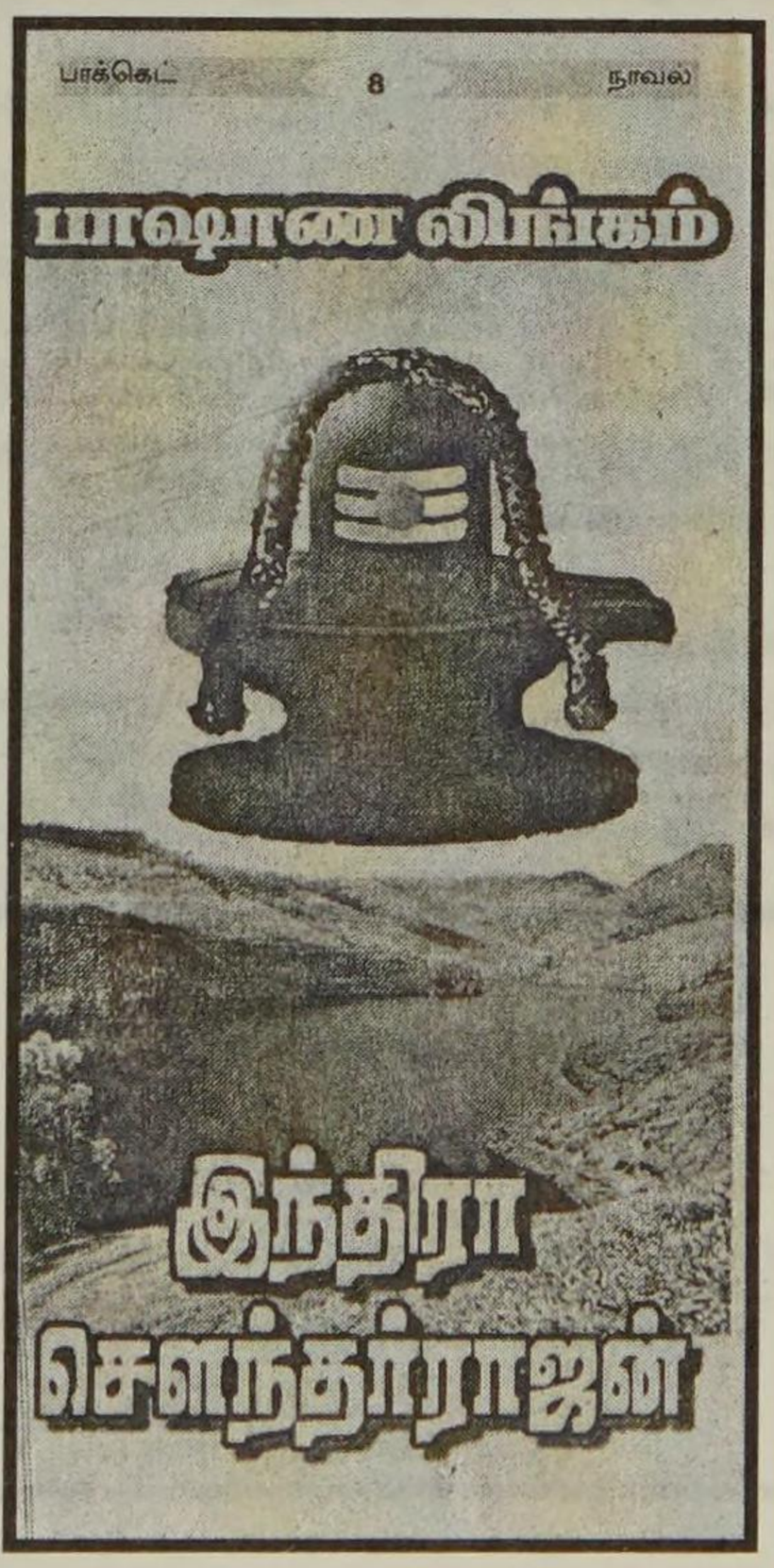
The murderer opened his dry lips and replied in a defeated voice, "Karwar Karunakaran, son of Karwar Sivakozhundhu!"





Title pages from Indra Soundar Rajan novels







கங்காரு பதில்கள்

ப.ராமகிருஷ்ணன் - புதுக்கோட்டை, காயக்காடு.

★ தாய்மை?

★★ உலகிலேயே மதிக்கத்தக்க உயர்ந்த பதவி.

★ தோல்வியை சந்தோஷத்துடன் ஏற்க முடியுமா?

★★ தோல்வியை எதிரியாக்கினால்தான் வெற்றி நண்பனாவான்.

★ காதல் எப்போது ரோஜா? எப்போது முள்?

★★ மோகம் என்ற தாகம் இருக்கும்வரை ரோஜா. தாகம் தணிந்து விட்டால் முள்.

★ நம் இதயத்தை எப்போது திறந்தும், எப்போது மூடியும் வைத்திருக்க வேண்டும்?

★★ பை-பாஸ் ஆபரேஷன் செய்யும் போது திறந்து வைக்க வேண்டும். சிகிச்சை முடிந்ததும் மூடி விட வேண்டும்.

ரேவதிமணாளன் - எர்ணாகுளம்.

★ டுவென்டி - 20 போட்டிகளில் தங்களை மிகவும் கவர்ந்த அம்சம் என்ன?

★★ முதலில் 5 நாட்கள் + ஒரு நாள் லீவு

என வீணானது - பிறகு 50 ஓவர் என ஒரு நாள் வீணானது. இப்ப இரண்டு மணி நேரம் நம்ம ஆள் ஆடறானா, ஓடறானா என முடிவு தெரிந்து விடுவது.

சாமி - திருவண்ணாமலை

★ மேலும், மேலும் சேர்க்க வேண்டியது குணமா, பணமா, புகழா?

★★ இயற்கையிலே இருக்க வேண்டியது குணம்; தேடிப் போக வேண்டியது பணம்; தானாக வர வேண்டியது புகழ்.

★ காளிதாசன்... கம்பன்... அப்புறம்...?

★★ பாரதியார், கண்ணதாசன், வைரமுத்து, (காளிதாசன், கம்பன் காலத்திலும் சரி இன்றும் சரி - வெளிச்சத்துக்கு வராத மகாகவிகள் எத்தனையோ பேர் இருக்கிறார்கள். ○

உங்கள் கேள்விகளை
அனுப்ப வேண்டிய முகவரி:

கங்காரு பதில்கள்

பாக்கெட் நாவல்

ஜீயே பப்ளிகேஷன்ஸ்,

352, திருவல்லிக்கேணி நெடுஞ்சாலை,
சென்னை - 600 005.

KANGAROO Q & A

from the introduction to a 2008 *Pocket Novel* by Indra Soundar Rajan;
G. Asokan, editor

P. Ramakrishnan from Pudukottai, Kaayakaadu asks:

★ *Motherhood?*
★★ A matchless job, the most important in the whole world.

★ *Should you accept failure with a smile?*
★★ Only once you make failure your most hated enemy will you be able to befriend success.

★ *When is love a rose? And when is it a thorn?*
★★ While the passion still exists, love is a rose; but once it vanishes, love becomes a thorn.

★ *When should your heart be kept open, and when should it be shut?*
★★ It should be kept open while you are undergoing a bypass, and shut the moment the operation is done.

Revathimanalan from Ernakulam asks:

★ *What's the best thing about Twenty20 cricket?*
★★ First we were wasting five whole days, including one break day. Then with fifty overs, it was just one whole day. Now, in the two-hour version, even before you figure out whether your favourite player is batting or running, you get to know the result.

Sami from Thiruvannamalai asks:

★ *Which should one strive for: character, fame, or fortune?*
★★ Character, you're born with. Fortune, you hunt for. Fame arrives at your door on its own.

★ *Kalidasan, Kambar... who's next?*
★★ Bharathiyar, Kannadasan, Vairamuthu. But remember: Even during the times of Kalidasan or Kambar, and still today, there are thousands of great poets who have never gotten a chance in the limelight.

Revered by women... Enjoyed by the Devas
For the lines of your kolams use

SPARTAN
RANGOLI
PAINT

மாந்தர்கள் மதிக்கும்
தேவர்கள் களிக்கும்
இழை கோலத்திற்கு

ஸ்பார்ட்டன்
ராங்கோலி
பெயிண்ட்

அடிஸன்ஸ் பேயிண்ட்ஸ் &
கெமிகல்ஸ் லிமிடெட்
செம்பியம், சென்னை 11.

அழகுடன் கோலம் போடுவது ஒரு தனிக்கலை அதற்கு உதவும் . . . அடிஸன்ஸ் பெயிண்ட்ஸ் தயாரித்து அளிக்கும் பெயிண்ட.

டைட்டேனியம் கலந்த இப்பெயிண்டினால் கோலம் வரைந்து மிகவும் பளிச்சென்ற தோற்றத்துடன் அழகுறச்செய்யுங்கள்.

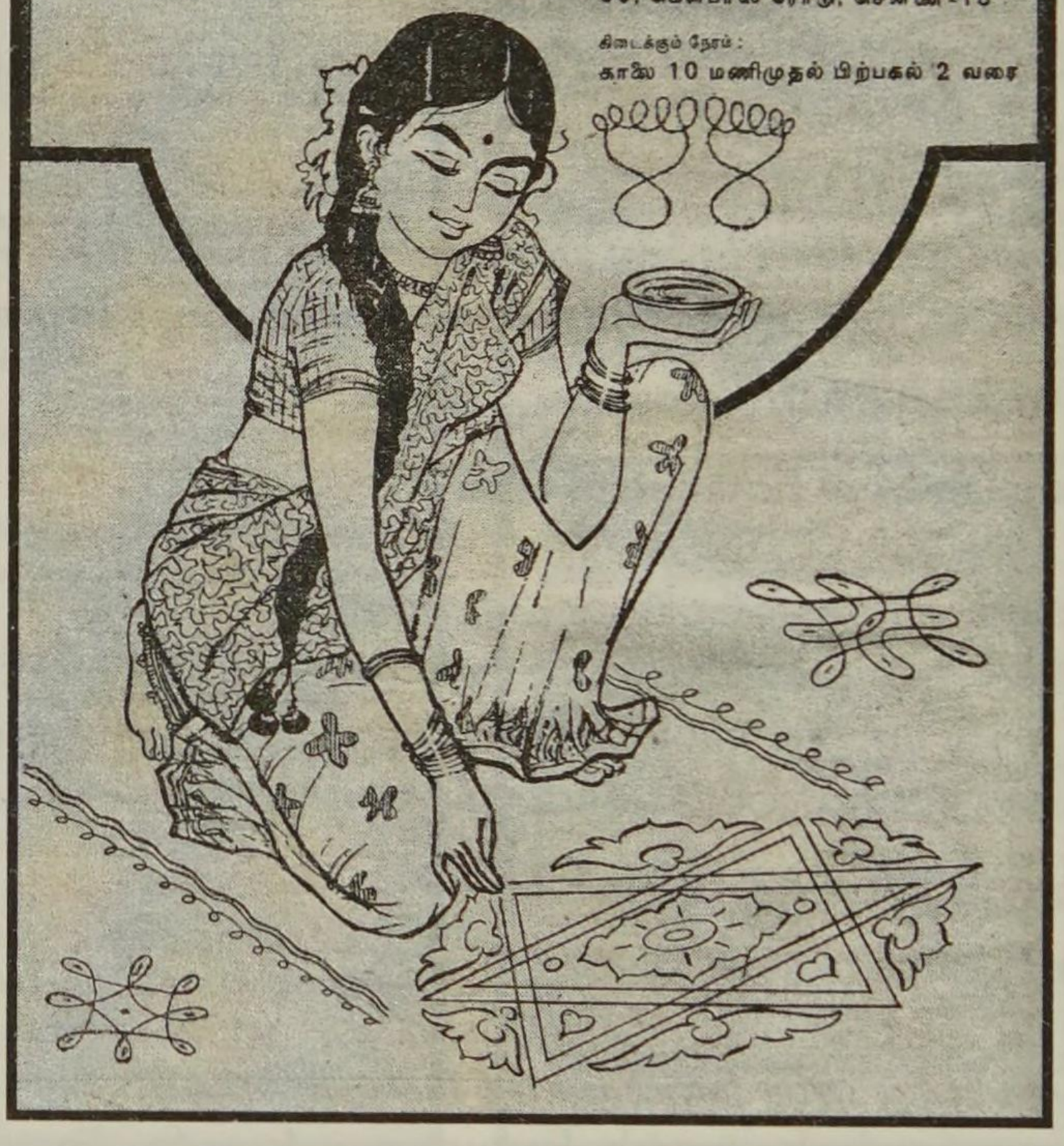
உலர்ந்தவுடன் கோலமாவு போல் வெடிக்காது, சிதறாது. உபயோகித்தவுடனேயே தரையில் மிகவும் அழுத்தமாக அமைந்துவிடும். கால் பட்டாலும்கூட வரைந்த கோலம் சிதறாது

அழித்துவிடுவது மிகவும் சுலபம். மிகவும் சிக்கனம்.

தற்சமயம் வெள்ளை கலரில் கிடைக்கும். விரைவில் நேர்த்தியான பல கலர்களில் கிடைக்கும்.

கிடைக்குமிடம்:
ஸ்ரீனிவாச காந்தி நிலையம்
96, மௌப்ரீஸ் ரோடு, சென்னை-18

கிடைக்கும் நேரம்:
காலை 10 மணிமுதல் பிற்பகல் 2 வரை



Drawing rangoli is an art... Addison Paints' latest product will make you an artist. Draw your rangoli with this titanium paint and watch it gleam before you. When dry, it won't crack or scatter like ordinary flour. It will adhere to the floor as soon as you paint the line and won't smudge if it's stepped on, either.
Easy to wash off—and inexpensive!
Now available in white, and soon in other colours too.

Available at Srinivasa Gandhi Nilayam, 96, Mowbray's Road, Chennai -18
Timings: 10 A.M. to 2 P.M.

(Ad from a 1970 issue of *Anantha Vikatan*)

PUSHPA THANGADORAI

Pushpa Thangadorai is a remarkably versatile writer. His output includes true crime stories; ghost stories; literary fiction; romance novels, such as *Oru Oodhappu Kan Simittugiradhu* ("A Purple Aster Winking"), which was made into a 1976 film starring Kamal Haasan; and a popular series of articles on his visits to Hindu pilgrimage sites, published under his real name, Sri Venugopal, in which he describes the importance of each temple and the special prayer rituals specific to each deity.

In 1980, he also tried his hand at writing stories for comics, in collaboration with Jeyaraj.

He lives in Chennai.

JEYARAJ

Jeyaraj started his career in 1958, without any formal training, as an illustrator for the popular magazines *Kumudham* and *Dhinamani Kadhir*. By 1980, he had done over 2,00,000 illustrations for short stories, novels, textbooks, and public service posters. He also drew many of the best-known Tamil comics from the period, including *Appusami and Seethapaatti*. Some of his personal favorites from his immense body of work are the sketches he did for *KJ*, a science fiction novel by Sujatha, and the ones he drew for *My Name is Kamala* by Pushpa Thangadorai (some of which were included in Blaft's first anthology). He has travelled extensively outside of India, and says that he has been greeted in many surprising places by Tamil readers who are collectors of his work.

He lives in Chennai with his wife.

காதலே 117



புஷ்பா தங்கதுரை

HIGHWAY 117

KAVITHA ARRIVES AT THE RAILWAY PLATFORM IN RANGAPATTINAM.

Oh dear, the train's already moving...

STORY: PUSHPA THANGADORAI
ART: JEYARAJ

KAVITHA JUMPS INTO THE MOVING TRAIN.

Why is this box in the middle of the aisle?

Sorry, it's too heavy for me to lift.

This? Too heavy?

Are you Karate Kavitha?

How did you know?

Your bag says so.

KARATE CONFERENCE JULY 8TH ...

KAVITHA SWINGS THE BOX UP IN A SINGLE MOTION.

MY good-ness!

THERE'S ANOTHER MAN IN THE UPPER BERTH.

Who's that man? He's holding his book upside down... Is he pretending to read? Must be a thief!!! The book cover has a stamp that says *Tal, Tal...* what can it mean?

I'm Umesh. I'm an archaeologist.

I see!

This train is surprisingly empty.

Be careful. Don't fall asleep, Umesh.

We're running late. I don't think I can make up the time.

Oh no! Someone has pulled the emergency chain!

What a bother. Grr, when I catch them.....!

I asked you who pulled the chain. Answer me!

Where's that chap from the top berth?

Looks like him there, running!

He must have pulled the chain to get off. What place is this?

Sri Sarvanipuram, a famous temple town.

See you!

Bye, bye!

AT DAWN, THE TRAIN ARRIVES AT KAVERI NAGAR STATION...

Seems an interest-ing young man.

THE NEXT MORNING, AT THE KARATE CAMP...

Theft at Subramaniya-puram Temple!

Gem-encrusted Murugan idol, silver crown, and golden thalis missing...

Could it be that man?

It must be him!

KAVITHA RETURNS HOME AFTER THE CONFERENCE.

THAT EVENING ON THE ROAD...

Umesh!

It's you!

Would you like to go out for a coffee?

Oh yes!

That Murugan idol with the nine gems is very ancient. Worth more than two lakhs! It's really sad. What are the police doing about it?

Let's ask them.

I'll take you to the Inspector General. I know him well.

Umesh, I know you're an archaeologist and I agree this is important. I'm assigning detective Gopal to this case.

IN DETECTIVE GOPAL'S ROOM...

This is the third idol theft. It happened in Krishnachalam and Panchavapuram already.

First, they are only choosing temples in provincial towns, and secondly, they leave behind no trace.

I'm sure it's all the work of a single gang.

Why do you say that?

THEY COME OUTSIDE...

Somehow, I don't think that guy will be able to catch them.

But what can you do about it?

How about me investigating on my own?

Great idea! I want to play detective, too!

Kavitha, I don't think it's safe for you to get involved in this.

I have my safety net.

What?

My karate!

Great! Then we'll start tomorrow and leave to Panchavapuram.

That's where the last theft happened?

Yes.

THE NEXT DAY, THE BUS DROPS THEM OFF IN A LONELY PLACE.

We're really out in the sticks!

AS THEY WALK UP TO THE PARTHASARATHY TEMPLE IN THE VILLAGE...

Perumal's golden crown is gone! So is the Goddess's jewelled pendant! And no one even seems to care!

He must be the temple priest...

Didn't the police come?

They brought a dog into the garbagraham and questioned me. That's all! They haven't found the thief yet.

Aiyyo, we're late. We've missed the bus.

You have to get to Ranga-pattinam, don't you? There is a train...

PANCHAVAPURAM RAILWAY STATION IS SET IN A DENSE FOREST.

Did anyone get off here on the day of the theft?

Nobody!

Did a goods train stop here?

No. But the 808 express stopped a little way off because someone pulled the chain.

Any-thing else strange?

O-ho... so that's their tactic... pulling the emergency chain!

A month later a de-composed body was found here. The police couldn't identify him; they assumed he was just a vagrant.

IN THE TRAIN..

The strategy seems the same. The emergency chain...

It's a smart way to escape being seen by anyone on the platform. They don't use the bus. They select towns that have train stations, but are far from the public eye.

So it must be the man who was travelling with us.

Yes... Too bad we didn't get a close look at him.

His name should be in the railway registration chart. How about we check when we get to Rangapattinam?

Great idea. But will they give us the info?

I have a friend.

Oh...

She's a she, OK? Her name's Rose.

Thank god!

Hello Kavitha, nice to see you!

I need a favour, Rose.

THAT EVE-NING...

Who's that? Just a friend?

Don't jump to conclusions.

Why not?

He's kind of shy. So what about that favour I asked you this morning?

The reservation list. Sure, I'll give it to you... Though by the law, I'm not supposed to.

This is it... Mr. Gandhi-nathan, 63, Rajamani Street. Take it down.

Yes.

ON THE ROAD...

You ride a motorcycle. Why not a scooter?

I'm Karate Kavitha, aren't I? Bye!

RAJAMANI STREET

ராஜாமணி தெரு.

Let's park here and walk.

AT DOOR NUMBER 63...

Is Gandhinathan here?

There's no one with that name here.

How dis-appoint-ing!

An idea!

What?

People make mistakes some-times. Perhaps it's 36, not 63.

Sure! Let's try that too.

Looks like a lodge.

AT NUMBER 36, THE GROUND FLOOR DOOR IS LOCKED.

Let's try the first floor.

Is Mr. Narayan-an here?

No idea.

UPSTAIRS, THEY SEE A MAN LOCKING THE ROOM AT THE END OF THE CORRIDOR... AS THEY APPROACH HIM, HE DROPS THE PAPERS HE IS CARRYING AND BENDS DOWN TO PICK THEM UP.

Looks like Gandhinathan.

And he's left the imprint of his hand on the door.

He's gone down. Have we lost him?

Let's hurry and catch up.

ON THE ROAD, A CAR LEAVES THE PARKING LOT.

Oh no... We didn't even get the car number.

That was Gandhinathan...

How are you so sure?

He put his hand on the door to balance himself. We'll get a kit and take fingerprints.

And what will we do with them?

Wait and watch me, mister. Let's meet tomorrow.

THE NEXT DAY, KAVITHA POWDERS THE DOOR AND PHOTOGRAPHS THE FINGERPRINTS.

Watch and warn me if anyone comes up.

Now we head to the station.

Rose, another favour please. Where would the compartment we travelled in that day be now? It's compartment number 3029.

Might be part of the mail train that's just come in now. Let's check.

No, the coach isn't here.

Let's ask the train exam-iner.

AT THE EXAMINER'S OFFICE...

3029 must have gone for cleaning.

Thank you.

So where will it be?

In the yard.

There, 3029!

Please wait for a second.

Yes ma'am.

SHE POWDERS THE CEILING AND PHOTOGRAPHS THE FINGERPRINTS.

I remember him keeping his hand here. Do you?

Kavitha, you are a smart woman.

THE NEXT DAY...

See... They match!

He travels by train, pulls the chain outside of small towns with temples, hops off and steals the idols.

Where do you think he lives?

I'm wondering about that too!

I think we should keep a watch on Rajamani Street.

Why?

He has to come back there sometime!

Idea! Let's take turns and watch in the evening from 4 to 8.

FIRST UMESH STANDS AND WATCHES...

AND THEN IT'S KAVITHA'S TURN.

WHEN KAVITHA TURNS TO LOOK DOWN AT THE OTHER END OF THE STREET...

There! That's her standing there.

Drive up close to her.

WITHOUT SLOWING DOWN, THE CAR COMES STRAIGHT AT HER...

IT SIDESWIPES HER! SHE LOSES HER BALANCE AND FALLS TO THE GROUND. TWO GOONS GET OF THE CAR.

BEFORE SHE CAN RE-COVER, SHE IS BUNDLED INTO THE BACK SEAT...

Shut up baby, it's no use.

There's a deep well out at the farmhouse. Let's show this honey her way to heaven.

But what about this driver?

This guy? Don't worry about this dumb-ass.

See? Go ahead... He'll wait until you've finished with the nuptials.

Chee, let me go!

So, is our honey pure?

Absolutely, straight from the honey-comb!

Aha, we've come to the bungalow.

THEY TIE HER TO A CHAIR...

Where's Kavitha? Why is she late?

Hello, is Kavitha there? No?

HE CHECKS AT A CORNER SHOP CLOSE BY...

A black car came by. I think she got in it, and they went south.

My god! They must have caught her!

She wouldn't have...

I just saw the car leave, and she wasn't there anymore. That's it.

You still mad, honey?

Chee, don't you come close!

You're even cuter when you're angry. I've got to get a look at that beautiful virgin body!

HE TEARS OPEN THE FRONT OF KAVITHA'S SHIRT.

SLOWLY, KAVITHA MOVES HER RIGHT FOOT UNDER A BRICK...

Aha! What a sight! But there's something more important I've got to see!

KAVITHA ARCS HER FOOT UP AND KICKS THE BRICK AT HIM!

THE OTHER GOON COMES RUSHING IN. KAVITHA RISES, STILL TIED TO THE CHAIR...

...AND SWINGS IT AT HIM!

BOTH OF THEM MANAGE TO GET TO THEIR FEET, AND COME TOWARDS HER...

KAVITHA SPINS LIKE A TOP!

SHE GETS ONE OF THEM IN A CORNER AND HITS HARD!

UMESH HEADS OUT INTO THE COUNTRY...

Yes, I saw a car pass by just a while back.

UMESH FLIES DOWN THE ROAD.

A MIGHTY KARATE KICK!

THE SECOND MAN GETS ONE TOO!

THE DRIVER HAS BEEN WATCHING THE STRUGGLE THROUGH THE WINDOW.

Aiyyo! I don't want to be a part of this!

Is she even a woman?

KAVITHA BANGS THE CHAIR AGAINST A PILLAR AND SHATTERS IT...

HANDS STILL BOUND, SHE RUNS INTO THE ROAD...

Umesh, where are you? Are you even looking for me? Umesh!

There... is that Umesh? Yes! I'm lucky!

Umesh, stop! I'm here!

Oh!

UMESH TURNS THE BIKE AROUND...

Are you all right?

I'm fine!

Take some rest, Kavitha.

Umesh, you are wonder-ful!

SHE RESTS ON UMESH'S LAP.

Umesh... Umesh...

Kavitha...

How good this feels! I love you, Umesh...

I wouldn't mind risking my neck all over again, just for this.

No Kavitha, let's forget this mission.

I promise to be with you always.

No, no! I won't sleep peacefully until I get the leader and his gang behind bars.

Okay Kavitha. Agreed.

A thousand flowers, all in bloom...

THREE DAYS LATER, KAVITHA IS IN HER ROOM...

Oh dear! Another theft, this time at Kurumalai temple... a diamond pendant, a chain of pearls, a Nachiyar idol, and silver bowls.... Oh god!

SHE MEETS UMESH.

That chain of pearls was a gift from Krishna Deva Raya. That alone is worth over 50 lakhs...

!

UMESH SHOWS HER A SKETCH OF THE TEMPLE.

See, there's police security on all sides. Every Friday there's a huge crowd. The Friday collection alone can be more than a thousand.

There's only one flight of steps. The rest of the hill is a sheer rock wall.

Let's leave right away!

IN THE BUS...

Do you think he went in with the crowd on Friday and hid himself?

He's an expert thief. He could have climbed up the steep rocks.

This whole area is dangerous. There are mountains, forests, and valleys all over.

Who would build a temple here?

THE BUS DROPS THEM OFF...

With an annual income of ten lakhs, this must be a rich temple.

It's a long way up. No one could make it up unnoticed.

Let's climb.

WHEN THEY REACH THE TEMPLE ENTRANCE...

There is no puja today. The priest is still unconscious in the hospital.

Were there any clues found about the theft last night?

Yes. The police found a burnt corpse.

Where was it found?

Next to that palm tree down there. You can go down this way, but it's tough.

Aiyyo, that *was* tough!

AT THE PALM TREE...

Kavitha! I found a piece of cloth that wasn't burnt!

THE POLICE MISSED SOMETHING!

What can you figure out from that?

A lot, Umesh! Remember, there was a body found after the Panchavapuram theft, too.

So?

And neither corpse was ever identified. What do you think it means?

Gandhinathan must kill his partners-in-crime.

Hey, you're right!

He takes a new partner for every theft, and then gets rid of him.

Kavitha, did you see this? A piece of rope ladder!

I'm sure he used this to climb the hill. But it doesn't look new. In fact it looks well-used.

ON THE WAY BACK TO RANGAPATTINAM...

Umesh, the only places where rope ladders are used are ships, or circuses...

He must have brought it from Ranga-pattinam.

Oh yeah! Gemini Circus is run-ning there.

AT THE CIRCUS...

Yes, this is one of our rope ladders. We brought it from Singa-pore. And yes, an artist has gone missing too... a guy named Sami-yappa. You'll find his wife in the tent.

Go see her. She works with us too.

Where did you find this? It's from his shirt. Is he okay?

GEMINI

Where did he go?

He had some new friend he went to meet at the mental hospital...

Mental hospital?

Sorry Savithri, your husband is dead. We'll come back when we know all the details.

Driver, go to the mental hospital...

AT THE HOSPITAL RECEPTION...

Hi! You're Karate Kavitha, aren't you? I've seen your photos. I'm Kalpana.

No, there's no patient here called Gandhi-nathan.

If he's not a patient, maybe he's on the staff?

No, not there either.

Do you have a group photo of your patients here?

Come along.

This is the one.

His name is Shantharaj, a patient in the Special Ward.

KALPANA TAKES THEM OVER TO THE INDIVIDUAL COTTAGES THAT THE WEALTHY PATIENTS STAY IN.

So to avoid the police, he is Shantharaj at the mental hospital and Gandhinathan when he's a thief!

Be ready!

Let me give him a kick first, *then* call the police!

Oh dear, he isn't here!

Does Shantaraj go away often?

Well, they *are* rich, paying patients. Who can question them?

Can we check his room please? We are looking for a clue.

What clue?

I'll tell you later, Kalpana.

Okay!

THEY SEARCH THE ROOM, BUT FIND NOTHING INTERESTING EXCEPT A PAPER...

I'll just take this with me, for what-ever it's worth...

THEY TAKE THEIR LEAVE FROM KALPANA AND COME OUT...

Umesh, take a look at this!

18th
1. Coromandel Express.
2. Drag chain up to cave.
3. Meet Ramudu.
4. Kill the guard.
5. Basket.
6. Cut the coupling.

THE 18TH IS TODAY! THE COROMANDEL EXPRESS LEAVES IN 10 MINUTES! THEY MUST HURRY!

Taxi!

Get in, Kavitha.

Let's check at every junction and see if we can find him.

Umesh, we are almost to Kurumalai.

But it's a steep grade from here on.

Hey, haven't we seen this tunnel before?

The train has stopped right inside the tunnel. The driver has given three whistles. That means someone pulled the chain.

Get off!

Let's walk back on the tracks.

That figure there-- I think it's him!

THE LAST TWO BOGIES--ONE FULL OF MAIL PARCELS, AND THE OTHER THE GUARD CAR-- ARE OUTSIDE THE TUNNEL.

I've finished off the guard.

Then chuck him out.

LV

THE GUARD'S BODY IS THROWN INTO THE GORGE...

SHANTHARAJ GOES OUT AND COLLECTS A BASKET FROM THE BUSHES.

Open the parcel van.

Yes boss!

That basket must contain the idol and the jewels. He's only transporting them today...

He can only hope to travel by train. If he took the bus, he'd be caught.

Aiyyo, that henchman is disconnecting the coupling to the rest of the train. We have to hurry!

Perhaps there's no signal.

Why has the train stopped?

Who knows? Let's wait and see.

Yeah, why has the train stopped?

Maybe the engine failed.

Dey, go to the guard car, switch on the hand brake and control the speed.

Yes boss!

THE LAST TWO COACHES BEGIN SLIDING BACK-WARDS.

KAVITHA AND UMESH ARE IN THE GUARD CAR...

Nice idea! So they plan to remove their stuff when they get to the plains.

I think Shantharaj is in the parcel carriage. I can see the smoke from his cigarette.

Put on the hand brake and follow me.

Who is that?

!

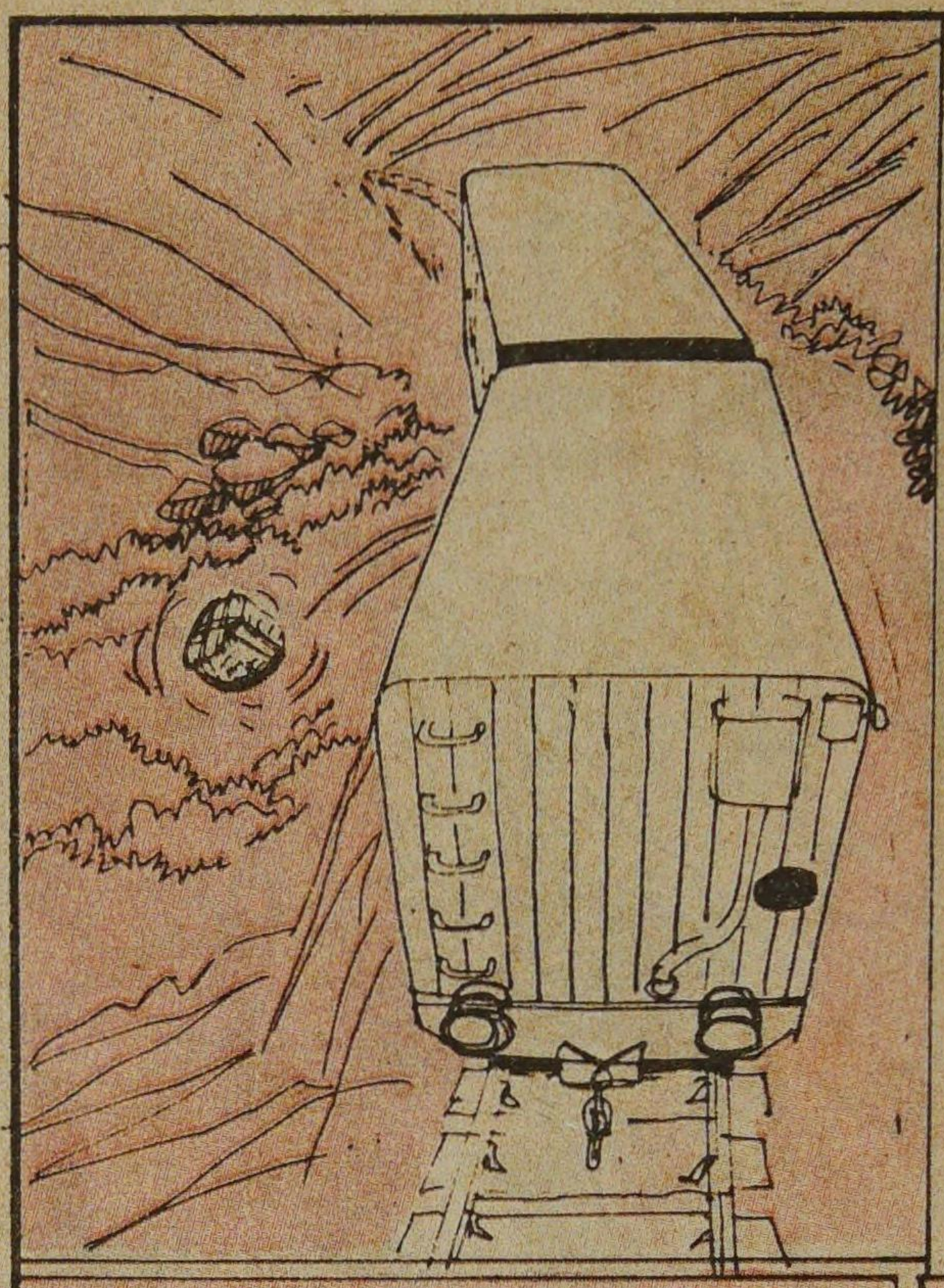
Poor guy! He didn't expect us.

THEY BOTH JUMP OUT AND LEAP INTO THE PARCEL CARRAIGE.

Umesh, throw that basket out.

Ow!

Done! I'm jumping out, too...



AS SHE KICKS SHANTARAJ DOWN, SHE PULLS THE DOOR...



AND BEGINS TO SHUT IT...





Aiyyo!

Amma! I'm dying!

KAVITHA GRABS THE HANDLE, LOCKS THE DOOR, AND JUMPS OUT.

Umesh, release the brake completely and jump out!

Righto!

Look... they're racing down the slope!

THE COACHES GATHER SPEED...

If they go down so fast, they might jump the tracks.

That's what I wanted.

THE COACHES TURN THE CURVE...

THE WHEELS SCREECH ON THE TRACKS!

Now...
just watch the
fun!

THE GUARD CAR IS THROWN FROM THE TRACKS INTO THE VALLEY, FOLLOWED BY THE OTHER COACH...

AND THEY ARE CRUMPLED INTO A HEAP.


He deserved this end.
Otherwise how many more would he have killed? How many more temples would he have robbed?



Come, quick, let's go up.

What's the hurry?

Isn't it our duty to take that basket to a safe place?

Correct!

The roads were useless for Shantharaj. So he depended on the railways. But today, the Express-117 let him down.

Kavitha, you are great! I never could have solved this on my own!

MEDHAVI

Medhavi's life seems to be nearly as mysterious as his stories. We don't know much except that his real name was Shanmugasundaram, and that in the 1950s he wrote about twenty-five novels for Prema Pirasuram (a venerable publishing house based in Kodambakkam, Chennai and today run by R. M. Ravi, son of the founder Aru Ramanathan, who was a prolific mystery writer himself). A few of Medhavi's titles, including the one translated here, have been in print continuously for over half a century. He also wrote several more novels for Vasu Pirasuram, another publisher that has since closed down.

While Medhavi has clearly drawn some inspiration from Western writers like H. G. Wells, his story also contains all the exaggerated suspense of vintage Tamil cinema. Readers familiar with the modern layout of Chennai should get a kick out of the tour of downtown as it was back in the day.

THE HIDDEN HOARD IN THE CRYPTIC CHAMBER

மாயா சமாதியில் மர்ம புதையல் (1956)

1

Prabakaran's Story; Vedanayagam's Strange Job

WELL, *THIS IS IT*, thought Prabakaran, as he prepared to arrest one of the prime suspects in the Manjula Bank heist. *Probably my last task as a police sub-inspector.* Just as the man put down his empty coffee cup and rose to leave Krishna Bhagwan Hotel on Mount Road, Prabakaran pounced and caught him—*labak!* "So, looks like we've finally got you in our net, Vedanayagam," he said with a smirk.

"In your net? I don't get what you mean, Inspector," responded

Vedanayagam, looking puzzled. On his forehead he wore a thick streak of *vibhuti*, like the ones worn by sorcerers in burning ghats to protect themselves from ghosts and evil spirits. In the middle of the streak was a red *kumkum pottu* as large as a quarter anna coin. On one arm he wore a silver *thayathu* charm. He could easily have passed for a devout swami.

"Chief Inspector Duraisami would like to speak to you about the Manjula Bank heist," said Prabakaran.

"Manjula Bank? What rot! I don't even know where that bank is. Why does your inspector want to discuss that robbery with me? He should be discussing it with sub-inspectors like you. That's why the police force recruits idiots like you, so you can waste time debating," Vedanayagam scoffed at him. "Tell me something. I heard you've come into a large fortune, and you're planning on quitting the police soon. Is that right?"

"I'll quit, all right—once I'm quits with you," laughed Prabakaran.

"Looks like you are determined to quit with at least one blunder in your cap. I have at least ten unimpeachable characters who will give me a rock-solid alibi. I don't understand your strategy, Prabakaran. Don't you know I'd never stoop so low as to rob a bank? I'm a lock-picking expert. Or have you forgotten?"

"What were you doing at ten o'clock on Tuesday night?" Prabakaran asked sternly.

Vedanayagam laughed. "And if I tell you? You'll say I'm lying, of course."

"Tell me!"

Vedanayagam did not answer at once. He was aware of the dangers of being completely honest with the police. He thought hard and then decided to tell a partial truth.

"I was occupied with some personal work. When I say 'personal', I mean that it pertains exclusively to myself, and that I have no inclination to divulge the particulars to others. It was nothing exceptional; but dignified work nonetheless!"

Prabakaran could not hold back a smile. "Vedanayagam, I've told you this before—stop memorising words from the dictionary and using them out of context. Talk simple! If you stopped wasting all your time

mugging up the dictionary and read some useful stuff instead, you might improve your brains some."

"Where would I get the time to browse through dictionaries? I just filch things said by others," Vedanayagam said shamelessly.

"Did you make good money, though?" asked Prabakaran, genuinely concerned.

"I made five hundred. Now don't look so stunned. I was asked to make a key for a lock that had never been opened before. And I don't think I'll do any more work for this particular client again, not even for lakhs of rupees. You can trust me on that," assured Vedanayagam. "I don't know anything about the Manjula Bank job. I was in Chengalpettu that night. As for *that* gang of thieves—you know who they are, and I know who they are. Nevertheless, we're not going tell each other, are we?"

Vedanayagam still had to spend the whole day in the police lock-up. In spite of hours of interrogation, the police could find nothing to link him to the Manjula Bank robbery. He had several people who swore that he had been in Chengalpettu from Tuesday through Wednesday.

The next morning, he walked out free.

After his release, Sub-Inspector Prabakaran took him to a nearby hotel for a coffee. Anyone would have believed they were the best of buddies. In general, there is no real malice between professional thieves and professional thief-catchers. Prabakaran, especially, enjoyed an equal respect among both the police force and the gangs of thieves.

"Look here, Inspector," said Vedanayagam, "I've told you everything I know. Still you have trouble believing me. For my last job, I got an advance of five hundred rupees. Had I completed the job, I would have made another two thousand. So, you can imagine how big it was. Or perhaps you have a weak imagination?"

Prabakaran gave him a keen look, and then said, "There is something you're hiding. Why don't you come clean?"

"I can't. If I did, I'd be getting the person who employed me into trouble. He's an evil man—I have no kind feelings towards him. But I'm no informer. I shall give you the general picture, and you can figure

out the rest by yourself," replied Vedanayagam, before tipping the entire glass of hot coffee down his throat.

"Inspector, sir," he said, "I didn't know the man who employed me personally. All I knew was that he was in hot water. He met me a few nights back and introduced himself...*Appada!*" His face drained of blood; it looked as if he had encountered a ghost. He mumbled under his breath to gain some confidence: "Shiva, Shiva!"

"When he first described the job, I didn't believe him," Vedanayagam continued. "I thought he was taking me for a ride. I should have refused it straight off. But you know me. I can't say no to anything with a bit of mystery involved. I accepted. It didn't seem cruel or deceitful. In a specific place, there was a strange... thing. All I had to do was peep in and tell him what was there. But the theatrics that followed!... *Adeyyappa!*... I don't think I want to talk about it."

Prabakaran could make no sense of this garbled explanation. All he could understand was that Vedanayagam was dying to reveal something, but was dead scared to do so.

"Did you have to break into a safe in a lawyer's office?" Prabakaran was shooting blind, but as a policeman he knew that blind shots sometimes paid off.

Vedanayagam shook his head. Then he suddenly took off into a long tale about his hometown, Nagerkoil, where he wanted to retire soon with his brother and become a farmer.

"Inspector," he said finally, "you and I are both planning to quit our respective professions at the same time. You're a friendly man, so it's no surprise you're unfit to be a policeman. And I'm honest, so I'm unfit to be a thief. Perhaps we shall meet someday... wait until then!"

Realizing he was going to get nothing useful from Vedanayagam, Prabakaran took his leave and headed straight to the commissioner's office. Inspector Duraisami was deep in his work when Prabakaran barged in and gave his brief about Vedanayagam.

"Vedanayagam was born a rascal," laughed Duraisami. "Beat him black and blue and throw him into a dry well, and he'll come out having

stolen the rocks from the bottom. Forget him, for now... I see you've completed your quota of work!"

"Yes."

"And so you're off to a picturesque village to live like a lord, are you? Soon you'll find a perfect girl to marry, give fashionable receptions for collectors and police superintendents, hire talented, beautiful singers to entertain them... What a life, Prabakaran! At this important juncture, when your service is crucial to the country and to your own career, you want to retire into a lazy, genteel lifestyle. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" Duraisami did not sound as if he were jesting.

Prabakaran's face went red with embarrassment. Three months ago, he had decided he wanted to retire to his village to write a novel. Soon afterwards he realized he had been hasty in submitting his resignation letter. He had tried everything to stop it from reaching the commissioner's desk, but had failed miserably.

"Well, they say wealth changes a man," sighed Duraisami. "Anyway, you are a sluggard by nature. So maybe this is your best option."

Prabakaran could take no more of it. The fact that tomorrow was his last day on the job lent him courage. He snapped, "And of course the whole world knows how diligent *you* are."

Duraisami gave him a strange look. "Prabakaran, you are but a lowly sub-inspector, under my command, until tomorrow when you officially retire. Maybe tomorrow, you'll be a lord sahib, but until then, you shall give me my due respect. You say I'm not diligent enough? Fine, then here's your next task. There has been a complaint that some books have been stolen from the Malaimel Vinayagar Library. Go find out the details."

Prabakaran hated taking up such petty investigations, but he knew he was paying for his insolent comment. And so he left at once.

On his way out, Prabakaran could not stop contradictory thoughts from racing through his head. Was he being stupid throwing away this lucrative post? After all, he had gained fame as an expert in cracking even the most difficult robbery cases. Duraisami himself often told him: "You think like a thief, Prabakaran!"

It was no exaggeration; Prabakaran did have a certain knack. Once, during an Annual Day function, when his friends wanted to play a prank, Prabakaran had demonstrated his skills. The law and order minister had been the chief guest of the day; Prabakaran had stolen his watch, his diary, and a few important letters right from under his nose. And he had accomplished this in spite of the heavy security around the minister!

Prabakaran's native town was in Kerala. His father, Menon, was superintendent of the Travancore prison; Prabakaran was his only child, and he doted on him. And so right through childhood, Prabakaran was a frequent visitor to the prison, and became friends with several inmates there. His sharp brain and natural charm made the convicts very fond of him. There were several seasoned criminals in the Travancore prison in those days. Among them were Achuthan, a lifer, and Shankaran, who came and went with regularity.

Both Achuthan and Shankaran took Prabakaran under their tutelage and taught him many of their trade secrets. Shankaran taught him the art of picking pockets, and how to make money playing a card game called *Munu Cheetu*—Three-card Monte. Achuthan taught him how to open the most complicated locks with only a tiny hairpin. So even before Prabakaran actually went to secondary school, he proved to be a good student under these two masters.

Had the devil taken hold of his mind, Prabakaran would certainly have become the most feared criminal in the country. But his family background and the discipline with which he was raised at home stood him in good stead. He completed his bachelor's degree with flying colours.

Prabakaran's mother worried about him keeping the company of these criminals, with all their crooked ways, and often complained about it to her husband. But he would just laugh it off.

"They're not teaching him all those lessons with the aim of corrupting him. It's just because they adore him so much. When he joins the police force, this tutelage will be of great help to him."

When Prabakaran did make into the force, he was posted in Coimbatore district. The higher officials soon noticed his unique talents, and transferred him to the state capital of Chennai.

As he stepped onto the portico, he bumped into the assistant commissioner, who was extremely unhappy that such a courageous officer was going to resign.

"Hello, Prabakaran. You're quitting work tomorrow, aren't you? What a loss! I suppose we can't hope that you'll re-apply, either; I hear you don't have to worry about money anymore. Our department is losing a talented man. So, what are you planning to do?"

"No idea, sir. I've actually been doubting whether resigning was the right thing to do."

The assistant commissioner thought for a moment. Suddenly he brightened up. "I just remembered. Do you know Rajangam Pillai, the lawyer?"

Prabakaran shook his head.

"A very good man; lives in Mambalam. You can get the address from the telephone directory. I met him last night. You're exactly the sort of person he needs. At the time I didn't think of you. He needs a full-time detective. Why don't you go see him? Tell him I sent you. That way, you'll have some immediate employment, and I can help a friend too."

"What sort of work is it?" Prabakaran asked, without any trace of enthusiasm.

"I don't know the details. I think it's for one of his clients. Why don't you go and see for yourself?" he said as he went into the building.

Becoming a private detective had never been one of Prabakaran's ambitions. Still, he felt he owed the assistant commissioner something.

As Prabakaran reached the gates, a peon came running with a message that the A.C. wanted to see him. Prabakaran went to his office.

"This evening I'll give Rajangam Pillai a call to tell him you're coming to see him. You will, won't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Prabakaran.

2

The Beauty at the Library; A Stolen Book

Prabakaran casually ambled up the path to Malaimel Vinayagar Library. This was no typical library stocked with crime and romance novels. The place held a wealth of material for researchers; several texts the big universities didn't even know existed found pride of place on its shelves. To even understand most of the books housed there required the highest sort of qualifications. The four floors of the building stored several thousand books and manuscripts on philosophy, religion, science, literature—in general, books that a lay person would find absolutely useless.

Diwanbahadhur Malaimel Vinayagar Mudaliyar had been the man behind this project. He had also set aside a huge endowment for the upkeep and maintenance of the library, even laying down strict rules on how things were to be conducted after his death. One of the important rules was that at all times, at least two of the administrative staff on duty had to be women. It was his dream that women would also make beneficial use of his library.

Unfortunately, in spite of all these efforts, the library generally remained deserted.

Prabakaran headed straight to the reception desk, where a young woman was flipping through a register.

"I'm from the police commissioner's office. We received a complaint about some stolen books."

It was not in Prabakaran's nature to give a woman any special notice, be she beautiful or ugly, intelligent or moronic.

"Yes. Just one," replied the woman. "I was on my lunch break when the book was stolen. It's not a very important book, just a Tamil translation of an obscure Sanskrit text from the Advaita tradition. The translator was Swami Nilaikolla Anandha."

"Who was at the desk while you were gone?"

"My assistant Parameswari was here."

"Did any library members come in during that time?"

"Yes, several of them. Their names are all listed in the register. But these are very upstanding people. There was one non-member who came in during that hour, to inquire about our subscription details—a North Indian. His name was Dr. Ranjit Singh."

"This Ranjit Singh—had any of you seen him before?"

"Parameswari recognized him from a photograph she had seen somewhere. I thought you'd probably know him," replied the woman.

"Why would I know the name, Madam?" snapped Prabakaran.

"You're a policeman, aren't you, Mister?"

At this, Prabakaran raised his eyes and met hers, with interest. Only then did he notice her beauty.

"I'm sorry. I don't normally take up petty thefts like this. I'm retiring from the police force tomorrow."

"So, are the thugs throwing a big party tomorrow night?" the woman jested, with a smile in her mirthful eyes. Prabakaran's heart leapt out and fell at her feet.

"I see you have a sense of humour," said Prabakaran with a grin of his own.

"Yes, it's important to be able to see the humour when you're surrounded by absolute stupidity. If I didn't have a sense of humour, the second someone referred to me as 'madam', I would tear him to bits, whether he was a sub-inspector or a commissioner."

"I apologize for my crudeness. Please tell me who this Ranjit Singh is. The name doesn't ring a bell," said Prabakaran.

"I don't know much either, except that the book was here at one in the afternoon, and later on, it wasn't. But from what Parameswari told me, I assumed the police would be familiar with Ranjit Singh. Have you seen his book?"

"He's written a book?" asked Prabakaran, surprised.

She went into the stacks, returned with a slim volume, and handed it to him. The title read *Human Metamorphosis Research*, by Dr. Ranjit Singh. Prabakaran flipped through the book. It was full of diagrams and mathematical equations.

"So why would the police be familiar with him? Writing a book isn't a criminal offence!"

"A book like this one *is* a criminal offence. But that's not what he was arrested for. Aside from chopping science into pieces, he also chopped some other things into pieces for his own convenience. He was arrested for that."

"So what's this book about?"

"It's about the human species. Ranjit Singh claims that instead of bringing man under social controls and discipline, he should be sent back into the forest and made to forage for his living, like primitive man did. Only then will he discover true joy and happiness," said the woman, laughing aloud.

For a few moments, both remained silent.

"The truth is… I'm sorry, what is your name?" she asked.

"Prabakaran."

"Mr. Prabakaran, we are not very worried about Swami Nillaikolla Anandha's book. We've got another copy in its place. Our secretary tends to get a little over-excited; he's the one who made the complaint. Please don't tell him I said that," she begged. Suddenly switching track, she asked with a mischievous grin, "Now that you're here, why don't you tell me about some of the interesting cases you've solved? I've never met a real live detective before."

Prabakaran pulled himself erect, so that he stood all of his seventy inches tall. "Madam," he said, softly, "I don't dare to ask your name. Would you kindly just tell me where this Ranjit Singh lives?"

She plucked *Human Metamorphosis Research* from his hand, opened to the first page, and pointed to the address beneath the foreword: Dr. Ranjit Singh, Hell's Haven, Rutland Gate, Chennai.

"Hell's Haven! The name makes my hair stand on end. It's in Nungambakkam," the woman said, shuddering.

"I can read for myself, thanks," said Prabakaran.

She threw him a weird look and said, "Mister, we have no time for such silly exchanges. We don't tolerate police arrogance here, either. One tramp writes some trash, another tramp makes a complaint…"

"Yet another tramp comes here to inquire about it?"

They shared a laugh.

"Did anyone else come here besides Ranjit Singh?" Prabakaran asked.

"I was here when the others came in. It could not have disappeared on my watch. I'm very careful..." Suddenly, she noticed that *Human Metamorphosis Research* had vanished from her desk.

"Did you take it?" she asked sternly.

"Did you see me take it?"

"I didn't. But it was here a second before..."

Prabakaran brought the book out from his coat pocket, handed it to her and said, "I love meeting people who keep a careful eye on the things around them."

"But how did you manage that? Wasn't I keeping my hand on it? I only turned away for a fraction of a second."

"I'll come back some other time and show you how I did it." He turned around and left the building. Only once he was back out on the street did he realize that he had never gotten her name.

Maheshwari—for that is what her name was—stood there, gazing through the library window at his back as he walked down the path. *What a pompous, self-obsessed man. I hope I never have to lay eyes on him again*, she thought to herself.

On the other hand, she thought a second later, *he might be interesting to get to know!*

3

Hell's Haven; The Mysterious Hunters

Prabakaran hoped his second encounter with Maheshwari would be sooner rather than later. But for that to happen, he had to meet Dr. Ranjit Singh first.

After a long search, he located Hell's Haven on the Rutland Gate road. By then, he was sweating with exhaustion, for finding the place

was as hard as trekking to hell itself. Asking passerby for the address was a joke—some simply laughed aloud at the name, while others avoided him, fearing he was crazy. It was only after many trips up and down the road that he finally found it, and by then it was late in the evening. A rundown, rusted iron gate was hinged to a dilapidated compound wall, in which was set a marble sign with the faded words HELL'S HAVEN, and below that the name RAMANANDHAN. The entire grounds were like a jungle, overgrown with wild, tall plants. The main building looked like it was ready to get up and walk off to hell.

Prabakaran did not know how many times he banged on the front door before it opened a crack, and a weird face peeked out. Prabakaran gave a slow, silent whistle at the sight of the man. He had a long, slim face, half of it covered by a wild beard, and the rest shriveled up like a shrunken mango. A pair of wicked, gleaming eyes stared out at him.

"Can I please see Dr. Ranjit Singh?" asked Prabakaran.

"I am he," barked the man. "You want to see me? Surprising. I don't generally meet anyone at home."

The door was still only open a crack. The man turned around and said something. It was then that Prabakaran noticed another person inside. Quickly, the other man moved out of Prabakaran's line of sight—but he was not fast enough.

"Hello Pichaikannu. I didn't expect to see *you* here," Prabakaran called out.

Mumbling to himself, Dr. Ranjit Singh opened the door wider. Prabakaran knew Pichaikannu pretty well, but this was the first time he had seen him so smartly dressed.

"I came to meet my friend, Dr. Ranjit Singh," grumbled Pichaikannu.

"You look like a sahib! What new games are you up to?" smiled Prabakaran.

"I'm presently very well employed, thank you. I don't think I'll be getting into any more trouble," said Pichaikannu. To Ranjit Singh, he said, "Well doctor, I should be leaving—"

"Not yet, Pichaikannu," Prabakaran interjected. "Please wait till I'm done here. I have a few things to discuss with you."

Pichaikannu threw a glance at the doctor. "Fine, sir. But I can't stay too long. I have some work to finish." Then he turned to the doctor and announced loudly, "Thanks again for the medicine you gave me, doctor."

It was clear to Prabakaran that no medicine had been exchanged. But he disregarded this, and simply handed his visiting card to the doctor, who led him into the main hall.

"Are you from the police?" asked the doctor, examining the card. "How strange! The police have not bothered me for a very long time now. I'll never forget the pain they put me through, though—completely disregarding the fact that I'm a world-famous scientist! And all because of an innocuous little experiment on a puppy. What do you want from me?"

Prabakaran briefly explained his mission, but the reply he got threw him off balance for a moment.

"Oh, that book?" the doctor said casually. "Sure, I have it with me. It's in my study. Hang on; let me fetch it for you."

"But… why did you take it?" asked Prabakaran, slightly bewildered.

"Well, it is a lending library, isn't it? I needed to borrow the book. So I took it. It's not like I stole it. I just walked out with it in my hand," replied the doctor. "In any case, I'm done with it. I don't need it anymore. That author is an idiot. His claims are completely wrong. I couldn't care less for his philosophies."

Before leaving, Prabakaran patiently explained to the doctor the proper procedure for borrowing a book from a library.

Pichaikannu was still waiting.

Pichaikannu's primary occupation was auto theft: hot-wiring parked cars and driving them away to Bangalore, where he'd dismantle them down to their tiniest component parts and then sell them as spares. He had even done two stints in prison for it; both those times, Prabakaran had been the one who caught him. Still, he had a soft corner for the thief.

"So how do you know the doctor?" asked Prabakaran.

"He's my physician," lied Pichaikannu, with no hesitation. "I'm a driver now. I work for a man named Andiappan. I'm an honest man these days."

"And where does this Andiappan stay?"

"In Kodambakkam... just a mile-and-a-half from here. You can ask him about my work."

"Does he know your past?"

"All of it. I hid nothing from him. He's very happy with my work. He says I'm the best driver he's ever had."

"And this costume, is that part of your job too?"

"I'm on leave right now. These are my own clothes. Here, this is my address now; you may inquire all you want," said Pichaikannu, before handing over an envelope from his pocket. It read: Pichaikannu, c/o Sri. Andiappan, Kodambakkam, Choolaimedu, Chennai.

"They treat me like their own son, sir," continued Pichaikannu. "He is married to my aunt."

"I'm happy for you, Pichaikannu. Don't take this the wrong way—but I honestly never thought you'd make for any good in this lifetime."

Pichaikannu simply gave a small smile, and left.

When Prabakaran returned the book at Malaimel Vinayagar Lending Library, Maheshwari wasn't there. Deciding it was too late to drop in on the advocate Rajangam after all, Prabakaran came straight back home. As he walked up the steps to his first floor flat, he heard a whispered call from behind him. Looking back, he saw Vedanayagam running up to him. He looked completely shattered, his face dark and the fear of death in his eyes.

"Inspector sir, I need to talk to you," said Vedanayagam, his voice quaking.

"What happened, Vedanayagam? Are you in some trouble?"

Vedanayagam threw a scared glance down the dark street. "I don't know as yet. All I know is I'm being followed."

"By who? The police?"

"The police? Of course not," Vedanayagam said impatiently. "At this point they're the least of my worries. Remember I was telling you this

morning about my new job? The man who hired me has someone after me. During the job, I saw him slide a revolver into his pocket. I began to suspect that once I broke open the lock, I might not live long enough to see my two thousand rupees. I was sure he'd shoot me down and bury me there. So halfway through I begged to go out for a leak and slipped off. Now I'm being hunted—by whom, I'm not sure. I don't have a gun on me, not even a dagger. You know I never carry a weapon."

Prabakaran took him in and locked the front door. "Vedanayagam, it's time you come clean and tell me exactly what happened. What was this mysterious job you were involved in?"

Vedanayagam did not begin at once. First he gave the room a thorough check; then he went to listen carefully out the open window for a moment, before shutting it tight. He came back and sat on the chair, exhausted. Finally he whispered, "I was asked to open up a dead man's tomb!"

4

Tales of Two Cousins

Though Prabakaran knew Vedanayagam had no reason to lie to him or try to shock him, he still could not believe it. "Go ahead, tell me the whole story," he responded.

"I can't right now. I apologize sir, but I'm still horrified by the whole experience. That man is a devil. I don't ever want to meet him again. I'd rather commit suicide."

"At least tell me who he is?"

"No! Maybe some day, I will. But not now, sir," Vedanayagam pleaded. "All I want right now is a peaceful place where I can sit and write everything down on paper. I can't bring myself to talk about it."

Prabakaran knew him well enough to see that he was genuinely rattled. He was even refusing to eat or drink. Realizing that getting any more information from him would be impossible, he finally said, "Why don't you spend the night here, at my place? If you want to, you can

write down your story—not that I demand you do it right away. This is probably the safest place for you tonight."

Vedanayagam had been hoping for an invitation. He accepted at once.

Prabakaran had just finished his dinner when the telephone rang. He answered the call.

"Is this Sub-Inspector Prabakaran?" asked a unfamiliar voice.

"Yes..."

"*Namaskaram*. My name is Rajangam; I'm an advocate. I had a call from the assistant commissioner today, and I was expecting you. Can you please come tonight?"

There was an urgency in the voice which Prabakaran couldn't ignore.

"I'll leave immediately."

"Can I expect to see you in fifteen minutes?"

"Of course."

Though he was eager to learn the rest of Vedanayagam's mysterious story, Prabakaran felt that leaving him alone might encourage him to write it down. He asked his cook to spend the night at her sister's place, and in fifteen minutes he reached Rajangam's house in Mambalam.

Rajangam Pillai the advocate was in his mid-fifties, very tall and thin. His dark, bushy eyebrows and strong jaw gave the impression of someone who wouldn't take any provocation lying down. His thick moustache and sideburns added to his ruthless appearance.

"Sit down, Prabakaran!" he said. "Are you the detective the assistant commissioner told me about? He said you're retiring from the police force tomorrow, and that you're looking for some temporary work. I have a job for you—a matter that has been worrying me greatly. You seem like the right person." He was now pacing the room restlessly.

"Though I am a practicing advocate, you may not have seen me in the court. Still, you may have heard of me. I represent several corporate houses and estates in their legal matters. I also act as a trustee for many noteworthy trusts in the city. One such client is the Ramanandhan Estate.

"Today, I regret taking that job. Years ago, Ramanandhan, the father, made me the guardian of his minor son, Pavanandhan. At home, they used to call him Thambikannu. The father used to be known as 'Gold Bar Saamiyar'. He's dead now. He was an extremely quick-tempered man—half-mad, almost. In fact, his family has a long history of strange behaviour. Have you heard of them?"

Prabakaran gave a very thin smile. "I have. In fact, just this evening I happened to visit a bungalow in Rutland Gate which had Ramanandhan's name on the marble sign at the entrance...That would be part of the estate, then?" he asked, thinking of Ranjit Singh. "Does the son reside around there, too?"

When Rajangam Pillai turned to reply, his eyes were glowing red with frustration. "No, he does not! If only he *did*, it would have solved my entire problem. But he hardly resides anywhere these days. He never stays more than two or three days in the same place. He must be the king of nomads! For the past ten years, he's been spending his money endlessly roaming from place to place, country to country. Luckily for him, the estate can afford it. Occasionally, he drops in here at Chennai. But I haven't seen him for four years now.

"I guess I should give you some of his personal background, for you to understand better. Pavanandhan was six when his father died. He has no other relatives, or I would have gladly handed over my responsibilities to one of them and washed my hands of this whole business. He was a very small, sickly child, so I couldn't manage to get him into a convent school until he turned eight. He hated the boarding school and would write almost every day begging to return. After a while I acquiesced, and had him home-tutored. He completed his matriculation exams with flying colours. He was still quite frail, though, and not interested in pursuing higher studies, so I sent him on a tour with his tutor.

"Maybe that's where I went wrong. He became obsessed with travelling. The last time I met him, four years ago, he was talking about going to Japan. He wanted to research the various cottage industries there and write a book about them. It's his lifestyle I'm concerned about. I often get emergency messages from him, asking for money. I make wireless

transfers of large amounts. Well, he's a legal adult now, so I can't question his spending. Still, it bothers me."

"Is he financially sound?" asked Prabakaran.

"That he certainly is, perfectly unshakable. I'm more worried about the way he disappears from sight like this, for years on end. He could be getting into all sorts of trouble, mingling with unsavory elements. That's why I want to touch base with him. Not directly, but through a third party—you! You have to leave next week. Take a ship to Hong Kong and then to Tokyo and contact Pavanandhan. Under no circumstances, however, are you to let him know that I sent you. He's travelling the world like a *samasthanam* maharaja, using the name Thambikannu. He keeps shifting base, so you might not be able to find him right away; you might have to chase him. I will keep you informed.

"At no point should you resort to the police for help. That could lead to unnecessary suspicions about him. All I need to know is this: Is he in bad company? Is the money that I keep sending him being well spent? He did tell me he has invested a lot in the share market, in several companies across the world. I have a few of the certificates with me, but he keeps most of them in some foreign bank somewhere.

"The reason I need to maintain complete secrecy is because he's a legal adult now. I have no real authority to oversee his activities. Will you help me out, Prabakaran?"

"Well, the travel seems exciting. But how long do you think I'll have to be gone?"

"I can't say for sure; could be a few weeks or perhaps a few months. It will all depend on what you find out. I will take care of all your expenses, besides a substantial fee." Rajangam quoted a number that was remarkably generous.

"When do I leave?" asked Prabakaran.

Rajangam flipped through his diary and said, "Today is Wednesday. You can leave in exactly a week. He's in Hong Kong at the moment. Then he'll be moving to Tokyo, where he'll stay in Hotel Vikoto."

Prabakaran rose to go, then suddenly turned around, thoughtful. "Tell me, do you suspect he could have fallen for an unsuitable girl? Perhaps even married one?"

"No, I have no reason to think that," replied Rajangam with a smile. "Once you get to know him, all I need you to do is convince him to return to Chennai and take over the responsibilities of the estate. Then he can marry any woman he wants, as long as he leaves me in peace. Ramanandhan Bhavanam, his ancestral home, is falling to ruin. It's sad that such a beautiful home should be left in the care of a single old servant while he wanders about. After all, he'll have to come back here eventually, even if only for his funeral." He spoke the words as if he were joking. It would be eight months before Prabakaran understood why.

It was a weird assignment, but it didn't sound dangerous, and the prospect of travelling around the world was appealing. After all, Prabakaran had been regretting his sudden joblessness.

By the time he left Rajangam's house it was quite late, and only then did a niggling thought about Vedanayagam disturb him. He could not find a cab, and had to leg it all the way home.

The house was completely dark. He knocked for a long time but no one opened the door. It was a modern lock, one that could be opened from either side, and Prabakaran used his key to enter. There seemed to be no sign of Vedanayagam in the house. There were a few white sheets of paper scattered on the writing table along with an open fountain pen. *Maybe he went for a stroll before settling down to write about that mysterious tomb,* thought Prabakaran. He sat up waiting for Vedanayagam until after two in the morning, but he did not return. Prabakaran went to bed puzzled.

At about ten in the morning, Prabakaran left to return the stolen book to Malaimel Vinayagar Library. When he entered, Maheshwari burst out laughing.

"Go ahead and laugh," said Prabakaran. "Here's that wonderful philosophy book of yours. That crackpot Ranjit Singh who took it had no idea how a lending library worked."

She stared at the book for a second and then asked, "Tell me, how did you find it?"

"I used my expert detective skills," he grinned. "You told me that he was a North Indian and gave me his address. He gave me back the book. And so here I am."

"Excellent!"

They both chuckled heartily.

Even though his work there was done, Prabakaran stood beside Maheshwari's desk for a while chatting. "Next week I'm going overseas for a few months. I don't know why I'm telling you this. Just thought you might be interested."

She smiled and said, "You are the strangest detective I've ever met. In fact, you are the only detective I've ever met."

He looked uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Prabakaran," she continued. "Many of the people who visit this library seem to want discuss their private lives with me. How can I sit and listen to so many personal stories?"

"You can't blame your visitors for that, blame your beauty!"

As if a sudden thought struck her, she asked impulsively, "Are you the detective that our family lawyer Rajangam is sending in search of a relative of mine?"

"Yes," he replied, bewildered. "Don't tell me Pavanandhan is related to you!"

Maheshwari gave a short nod. "Yes, he's my *pangaali*...a distant cousin. One night, while my mother and I were talking with Rajangam, he told us about his plan to look for him."

"You've met Pavanandhan?"

"No. I think my mother met him once when he was a young boy. His father was a cruel man. I'm sure Rajangam has told you about him. So, that's the trip you're off on, is it?"

"Yes, that's what I wanted to tell you."

Just then the library secretary walked in, and so Prabakaran had to leave at once.

Back at the police commissioner's office, he gave a full report about Vedanayagam to Inspector Duraisami, who listened without interrupting. Finally he commented, "I wouldn't believe a word that rascal says. I'm sure it's just a tall tale."

Prabakaran could only laugh.

"Tell me Prabakaran, if there was something bothering Vedanayagam's conscience, why did he leave before he wrote it down? Did you see anyone else?"

"I didn't see anyone, but his fear was real," said Prabakaran.

The inspector did not look convinced. He called for a constable and ordered, "Send someone out to find Vedanayagam, and bring him here. Actually don't!" He turned to Prabakaran. "You know his house. *You* go get him!"

"But my duty here finishes today…"

"Not until midnight tonight. Now go!"

Vedanayagam lived down a tiny lane, next to the sewage gutters near Kilpauk Mental Hospital. But the building owner could give him no information. Prabakaran checked a few other likely places, but learned nothing new except that Vedanayagam had left in a hurry the previous night.

When Prabakaran reported this back to Duraisami, the inspector seemed to take the matter more seriously. "I'm beginning to believe that Vedanayagam was telling you the truth. If he was really so anxious, then we need to look into it. He may be a crook, but it would take something extraordinary to turn him into an informer. Perhaps he is back at your house."

But when Prabakaran returned home, Vedanayagam wasn't there. His cook hadn't seen him either.

As he had some final paperwork to finish before he resigned, Prabakaran decided to change out of his uniform into short sleeves, and went to his bedroom. The shirt that he normally kept draped on his coat rack was missing. He asked the cook if she had taken it for washing. She told him that she had put it in his wardrobe the previous morning.

Prabakaran pulled open the wardrobe door. Something heavy fell on him and knocked him to the floor. He stood up, flustered, and saw that it was the corpse of Vedanayagam, with his neck broken!

5

The Corpse in the Cupboard; The Hasty Expedition

The police force had gathered at Prabakaran's residence. The doctor who examined the body declared that Vedanayagam had been dead for several hours. Prabakaran shivered. He had spent the whole night sleeping in the same bedroom with a dead body.

"Is there any sign that he put up a fight?" inquired one of the officers.

"No, the doctor is right," said Prabakaran. "He was struck by a heavy object and killed instantly. But how did the murderer get into my house?"

The neighbours had not noticed anything strange the previous night. The police searched Prabakaran's house for some clue. The only possible way someone could have broken into the first floor of the building was by climbing up the tree near the kitchen window. But it would not have been easy. Prabakaran had not gone into the kitchen since he returned from Rajangam's house. So he couldn't be sure if the kitchen window had been ajar or not. The cook said that both the kitchen door and the window had been wide open when she reported for work that morning.

"Do you have any idea who was threatening Vedanayagam?" Inspector Duraisami asked Prabakaran.

"He didn't tell me. He was too shaken up. All I know is that his last job was to open a hidden chamber in a crypt. Vedanayagam was sure that his life was in danger."

The officers debated whether Prabakaran should postpone his commissioned trip abroad because of the unexpected developments. Finally, they decided that unless someone was arrested under suspicion, there was no need for Prabakaran to stay in Chennai. In case they did take someone in, then Prabakaran could return to give witness. Otherwise he

could leave straight away. This was communicated to Rajangam, as well. And so, as per the previously laid plans, Prabakaran boarded the ship a week later for Hong Kong.

After years of effective service on the police force, Prabakaran marveled at the quixotic errand he had set off on so impulsively. He knew neither the person he was looking for, nor where he would find him.

6

Maheshwari's Strange Key

At the same time as Prabakaran was crossing the sea in search of the elusive Pavanandhan, the city of Chennai was tearing its hair out over Vedanayagam's murder. On board the ship, Prabakaran too broke his head over it for a while, until thoughts of Maheshwari took over his mind. He could only recall her face, not her name, for he had forgotten to ask her for it. And so he was unable to drop her a line, or send her postcards from every stop he made, as he would have liked to.

In his haste to set off, he had not even had time to go wish her goodbye. For a second a crazy thought occurred to him: what if he were to address his letter to *The Bold and Beautiful Woman, c/o Malaimel Vinayagar Library*?

When he got to Singapore, and was waiting for the boat for Hong Kong, he sent in an annual membership subscription to Malaimel Vinayagar Library; though there wasn't a single book there that interested him, he hoped that she would at least sign the receipt. Only after he posted it did the silliness of the gesture strike him, for he had signed his Singapore hotel address—and of course, by the time the reply came in, he would be in Tokyo.

During the days he was overseas, there was no way he could learn of the progress on Vedanayagam's murder case.

Having missed Pavanandhan in both Hong Kong and Tokyo by a hair, Prabakaran set off to Ceylon. There, he searched for him in Colombo, where he learned that his target had already sped off to Durban in South

Africa. Before he could continue his hunt, he received a telegram from Rajangam asking him to return to Chennai at once.

Finally tiring of this impossible pursuit, Prabakaran took the Indo-Ceylon Express from Colombo to Chennai. When the train reached Manamadurai, he saw something that made his eyes pop out.

Maheshwari was waiting on the station platform. She boarded the first class compartment.

"You!" he cried excitedly.

"Yes, it's me," she responded joylessly.

To have an excuse to go on talking to her, he said, "I sent in a subscription to your library."

"I know. I signed the receipt."

"Oh… So you are…" He pretended to have momentarily forgotten her name.

"Yes, it's me."

She remained detached. Realizing he wasn't going to get any voluntary information, he finally asked, "So, what *is* your name?"

"Maheshwari."

"Ah… I remember now."

"You read that on the receipt, did you?"

"Yes I did," he lied.

"That's interesting. The receipt was returned, because the addressee was unknown," she responded mercilessly.

Seeing that his game was up, he said with a smile, "I've never met a woman like you. You can make a fool of any man."

When the Indo-Ceylon Express arrived at Karaikudi, Prabakaran took Maheshwari to the station canteen. They returned to their coach just seconds before the train was to leave the station.

In the few minutes they had been absent, Maheshwari's suitcase had been opened and her things strewn about the coupé. But everything was still there.

"Are you sure nothing was stolen?" asked Prabakaran, concerned.

"Absolutely."

"How strange!"

"This is the second time this has happened to me! At Manamadurai, I left my suitcase in the waiting room to go to the bookstall to buy some books. When I returned, my suitcase had been thoroughly rummaged through."

Neither of them slept till the train reached Chennai, and not only because they were worried about thieves. There were more interesting reasons. They kept a light-hearted conversation going.

"So what made you take off on a sudden vacation?" asked Prabakaran.

"Who would go on vacation to Ramanathapuram District? It was hell!"

"My trip was no picnic either."

"Are you in search of a key, too?"

Prabakaran stared at her bemused. "What?"

Maheshwari opened a small clutch purse and pulled out a long envelope. In it was a strange key, about two and a half an inches long. Prabakaran had never seen one like it before.

"Did you go looking for this key?" he asked.

Maheshwari nodded. "But when I left Chennai, I had no idea what exactly I was after. My father knew a gardener, Panchanadham, who used to work for the Ramanandhan Estate. Three months back, my mother received a letter from a monk at the Saiva Siddhantham Mutt. It said Panchanadham was dead, and that on his deathbed, he had said something about how he regretted betraying our family. He had left this envelope with the monk to be delivered to us. Neither my mother nor I wanted to go to Manamadurai; my income from the library was sufficient for us to live comfortably. But after two days we received another letter, with a round trip ticket to Manamadurai and a hundred rupees."

"Who sent it?"

Maheshwari shrugged. "I don't know. I decided to make the trip, for I was curious. Once I got there, the monk told me there had been three break-ins at the Mutt, and he suspected that it could be someone after the envelope. He told me that Panchanadham had become very rich by the time he died, so naturally I thought he had bequeathed us something

valuable. I was disappointed when I opened the envelope and found only this key."

Prabakaran examined the key carefully.

"Hmm… You say Panchanadham was just a gardener. But you also say he struck it rich. So where did he get the money? Did he leave any letter along with this key?"

"No. I'm not sure what made me keep the key in my purse and not in my suitcase. While I was on my way back from the mutt to the station, I was walking down a lonely street. A coolie was walking ahead of me, carrying my suitcase and my leather shoulder bag. Suddenly, in broad daylight, a stranger pounced on him and ran off with my shoulder bag. I was so shocked that I didn't even scream for help. In any case, there wasn't anything of value in the shoulder bag, and I didn't want to waste time with the police. Then at the station, again, my suitcase was searched."

Prabakaran sat in front of her, deep in thought.

"What do you make of these strange happenings?" she asked.

"One thing's for sure: somebody desperately wants this key!"

The train had reached Egmore Station. Prabakaran leapt up, gathered his things, and with a casual "See you sometime!" rushed away. She stood up, puzzled.

A short while later, at the taxi stand, a coolie placed Maheshwari's suitcase in the cab and stood there sheepishly holding out his hand for money. She had just opened her purse for change when suddenly someone brushed her from behind. Simultaneously, somebody else bumped into her from the front. She lost her balance, and the purse flew out of her hand and landed ten feet away. A third man standing there picked it up and flung it to yet another man, about twenty feet away.

When the fourth man caught the purse—*labak!*—and turned around to run, there was a hard punch—*pateer!*—on his face, and—*veduk!*—the purse was snatched from his fist.

"Rascal, walk with me to the police station," ordered Prabakaran.

But unexpectedly, the man wrenched himself from Prabakaran's hold and disappeared from the scene.

7

Card Tricks

When Prabakaran entered Rajangam's house the next morning at ten, the advocate was expecting him.

"So, you never got to meet Pavanandhan?" Rajangam asked, perturbed.

"No sir. The faster I chased, the faster he ran away."

"He's crazy. Right now he's in Durban," said Rajangam, taking a file from his table and pulling out a telegram from it. It was sent from Colombo three days before Prabakaran had arrived there. It read:

Advocate Rajangam Pillai, Chennai:

Who is this Prabakaran who is looking for me? I am sending the Power of Attorney in your name. Please don't trouble me any further. I shall be in Chennai next month.

Thambikannu.

"I'm sorry I sent you off on this wild goose chase," said Rajangam. "Did you learn anything interesting while you were there?"

"He doesn't rest anywhere long enough for anyone to notice him. I did inquire at the hotel he stayed at in Colombo. No one had anything to tell me. He was still in Ceylon when the Indian delegation visited." Prabakaran paused for a moment and then asked, "Tell me honestly, what do you think Pavanandhan is up to?"

Rajangam bit his lip and replied, "I'm not sure. Maybe at worst, he's married some foreign woman and is too embarrassed to bring her back to India."

"I wouldn't worry about that, sir. Can I see all the letters you've received from him till now?"

Rajangam brought out a thick file full of letters and telegrams from various parts of the world. "This is what has come from Thambikannu

in the past year. The older ones, I've stored in two huge trunks. Do you want those too?"

"Not necessary. Are you sure this is Pavanandhan's handwriting?"

"I'm absolutely sure. There's no question of someone forging his handwriting."

"I'm sorry, but in spite of my best efforts I couldn't even get an idea of what kind of a person he is. Maybe sometime later I will want to check every letter of his, for I find him very interesting," said Prabakaran.

"Not now?"

"No. And I think you can forget about him having married a foreigner. He was staying alone both in Hong Kong and in Tokyo; I don't think he's connected to any woman. I want to meet him when he's in Chennai," said Prabakaran.

Rajangam gave a smile. "Of course, you must. Unfortunately he will probably want to leave the next day."

Receiving a cheque for his fee, Prabakaran returned to his house. There he took out the suitcase which contained his notes and hotel bills. At the bottom was a blotting paper with a smudged impression of an address: Dr. Andiappan, Choolaimedu, Kodambakkam, Chennai.

Prabakaran had found the blotting paper in the Tokyo hotel room in which Pavanandhan had stayed just forty-eight hours before Prabakaran had arrived there. Fortunately no one else had checked into the room afterwards.

Prabakaran locked the blotting paper in his drawer and went up to the mirror. He sighed at his reflection and thought, *I call myself a detective. Yet I have proved myself completely inept.*

Back at his study table, he took out a pack of cards. He had learned some complicated card tricks during the cruise. One of them was shifting the top card of the deck to the ninth position. Placing a stopwatch in front of him, Prabakaran practiced this trick over and over until he could accomplish it in a quarter of a second. Pleased with himself, he rose from the table, lay down, and slept. He awoke at dusk, got in his car, and drove westward.

8

Dr. Andiappan Screams

"Your name?" the woman asked in a distinctive, grating voice.
"Kanakasundaram."
"Please wait a moment, I will see if my husband is free." She took his visiting card and went into the next room.

Short, balding, with a distinctly effeminate voice, Dr. Andiappan could not be described as an engaging conversationalist. A point that could be crisply made in three sentences would take him a minimum of ten minutes to explain. He was aware of this shortcoming of his, though, and before the other person could laugh at him, he'd joke about it himself.

His wife entered and gave him the visiting card. It read: Kanakasundaram, 428 Mugalai Street, Singapore.

"Ask him to come in," said Dr. Andiappan.

The name Kanakasundaram didn't ring a bell; the only person Dr. Andiappan knew by that name was an importer who wasn't from Singapore. But then, Andiappan had met quite a large number of people in his lifetime, and couldn't keep track of them all.

When Kanakasundaram entered the room, Andiappan was examining a small leather bag. The bag had a compartment with a small diary in it, and also contained a few stamps and a pouch for change. When he realized that Kanakasundaram was in the room, he quickly stuffed the bag under a pile of papers on the desk.

"Please come in. Though I generally never meet anyone this late."

Kanakasundaram took a seat, smiling.

"What did you want to see me for?"

"I have an important matter to discuss with you," replied Kanakasundaram. "You own a farm just outside the city of Singapore, don't you? Well, I own the farm next to yours."

Andiappan nodded. He was in fact the owner of several valuable properties in different countries.

"I believe that there is gold beneath your land," said Kanakasundaram. "An engineer examined the soil a few days ago."

Kanakasundaram took out a plan from his pocket and laid it open on the desk. He proceeded to explain in detail where the gold veins were likely to be. Andiappan nodded again, already aware of this.

Kanakasundaram paused for a moment, then abruptly asked, "Didn't you buy this property from someone named Pavanandhan?"

For a second Andiappan was taken aback. Then he gathered himself and said, "Yes, I bought it through his agent. I forget the agent's name, though. It's not easy to meet Pavanandhan; he's a globe trotter. One day he'll be in Japan and the next in South Africa. He's a very strange man.

"I am grateful to you for taking the trouble to come here and tell me about the gold deposits. But my Malaysian agent has already told me about it. Still, it was very kind of you to make this long trip." Andiappan's stiff smile seemed to indicate that he wanted the meeting to be over.

"Does Pavanandhan correspond with you?" asked Kanakasundaram, with no intention of leaving.

"No, no. I don't think he even knows I exist." He discreetly peeked at his watch and exclaimed, "Oh god! It's past ten-thirty. I really must ask you to leave."

After Kanakasundaram—who was actually Prabakaran in disguise—had gone, Andiappan's wife entered the room, demanding, "Who was that?"

"He's Prabakaran. A detective."

"Oh no! What was a detective doing here?"

Andiappan was thoughtful. "He's very good at his job. I was expecting him to turn up, though; I have three photographs of him, in three different disguises."

He looked under the stack of papers on the desk for the leather bag. There was nothing. Andiappan went deathly pale and rose to his feet.

"It's gone!" he screamed. "My diary… the key… they've both disappeared. Oh my god, the key!"

His steps faltered, as though he was drunk, and a look of panic spread across his face.

"That bastard detective must have stolen it while I was looking at the plan—from right under my nose!" Dr. Andiappan growled. "I forgot he was a brilliant thief as well. That rascal! Shut the door, I need to make a call!" screamed Dr. Andiappan.

9

Red Lights in the Middle of the Road

It began to rain heavily as Prabakaran left Dr. Andiappan's place. He stepped on the car's accelerator, heading to his home on Anderson Road near Thousand Lights. Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, he reached over with the other to make sure the leather bag was safe. He felt something solid in the pouch. Thinking it could be a wad of money, he parked the car and checked. It was a key—a key very similar to the one that Maheshwari had showed him.

Prabakaran gave an excited whistle, took the key out, and tucked it beneath the rubber mat under his feet; for he expected trouble from the same gang that had tried so hard to steal Maheshwari's key. Very slowly, pieces of the mystery were beginning to connect. Maheshwari's key was now in a bank safety locker; this one appeared to be a duplicate. Perhaps there were more around.

Prabakaran knew very well that Pavanandhan had written to Dr. Andiappan. So why had Andiappan claimed not to know him? Prabakaran had seen him furtively hiding the leather bag. Mere curiosity had made him flick it.

He drove from Choolaimedu to Nungambakkam Village Road via Kodambakkam High Road. There he found his route blocked because of road repair work, so he took a detour through Krishnamachari Road onto Nungambakkam High Road. When he turned down Khader Nawaz Khan Road and turned right to get to his house, he saw three red fount lanterns placed in the middle of the road. He slowed down, confused. A lorry had turned down the same road not long ahead of him, so the road must have been passable. Were the lanterns part of some devious plan?

He switched off all the car lights, took out something from his pants pocket and silently got out of the car. He walked to the lanterns and picked one up. It looked very old and seemed to have been hastily painted red, for the paint was still wet. All three lanterns were different in shape. He flung the lanterns to the side of the road; they fell some distance away and broke to pieces. Irritated, he got back into his car and turned the ignition. Though the starter whined, the engine would not start. After trying twice more in vain, he checked the fuel gauge; it showed empty. He had filled the tank just before leaving to see Andiappan. How could it be empty so soon?

Once again, he got out with his torch and walked around the car. The petrol was running out in a stream into the rainwater. Someone had ruptured the tank while he was checking the lanterns! He had no spare can of petrol—and he was suddenly aware of being alone in that dark street.

He flashed his torchlight over the houses on either side. He was shocked to realize that he was stranded very close to Hell's Haven. Cautiously, he entered through the battered gates. After taking just ten steps he came to a sudden halt. There was a narrow, six-foot-long pit dug behind a bush. The earth had been freshly turned up, as if to bury someone.

Vigilant, he quietly went up to the front door. There seemed to be no sign of human occupation; in the dark, it looked like a haunted house. Fearfully he knocked on the door. After several knocks, he could hear the key click inside, and the safety chain being taken off. The door opened a crack and Ranjit Singh peeked out. "Who is it?"

Prabakaran asked him for some petrol.

"What? You want petrol? What are you, crazy? Alright, I'll give you some... but you'll have to pay me for it."

There was no sign that Ranjit Singh recognized Prabakaran; he merely opened the door a little further. He was now dressed in a long dirty black robe, and wore a decrepit pair of house slippers. It didn't look as if he had bathed since Prabakaran had last seen him. His hands were scarred with chemical burns, and his fingernails were long and grubby. In contrast, the main hall of Hell's Haven was decorated very ornately,

with a luxurious carpet, soft comfortable sofas, and opulent chandeliers. But when Prabakaran took his first step into the room, a cloud of dust rose up from the carpet around his foot.

"You stay here. I shall get the petrol," said Ranjit Singh. He went into another room, and returned with two cans.

"There are four gallons here," he said, and gave Prabakaran a close look. As if he had only just remembered who Prabakaran was, he said, "We've met before, haven't we? Didn't you come to see me about the library book? I am Ranjit Singh."

Prabakaran nodded, wary of what might be in store.

"You must have heard about me. I am a world-famous scientist, after all! Alright, now pay the money."

"Thank you very much, sir. Here's twelve rupees; don't bother with the change."

The scientist pocketed the money, looking quite pleased with the extra rupee—which Prabakaran found odd. He opened the door and stepped out. The scientist looked for moment as if he wanted to say something, but then suddenly changed his mind, stepped back, and—*pateer!*—slammed the front door shut.

Just then a terrifying scream rose from nowhere; slowly, it grew louder, and then reduced to a whimper. Prabakaran realized that it was coming from inside the house. He felt himself grow cold. Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. He wondered if he should barge back into the house and find out who was screaming. Quickly deciding against it, he tucked his torch in his pocket, picked up the petrol cans—one in each hand—and walked through the overgrowth into the rain, his heart pounding fast.

As he approached the pit, he was gripped with panic. He could hear a rustle behind him, and was sure he was being followed. He swirled around and began walking backwards. Now the sound was closer. He put down the petrol cans and reached for his revolver. Suddenly two strong arms grabbed him around the shoulders. The body behind him was half-naked, monstrously hairy. Huge hands were now strangling his neck. But the horror of impending death lent him strength, and he

smashed his head back into the attacker's chin. The beastly figure behind him gave an eerie yell and loosened its hold.

Prabakaran whipped out his revolver. "Don't move!" he cried, flicking on his torch.

There was nothing in front of him. He directed the beam left, right, and even behind him. When finally he shone it on Hell's Haven, the building looked even creepier than it had before. Then he saw it: a huge figure, wearing nothing but a loin-cloth, rushing through the thick bushes towards the bungalow. Prabakaran felt his blood freeze. He was sure, now, that the freshly dug pit had been readied for his burial.

Immediately, he picked up one of the petrol cans, and within five minutes he had patched his tank and vanished from the area.

10

Dr. Andiappan's Rage

If Dr. Andiappan had been able to walk the whole way to Hell's Haven, he would have done it. But to get there, he had to face both a raging storm and his driver Pichaikannu's grumbles. About a hundred feet away from Hell's Haven, he got out of the car, giving a warning: "Pichaikannu, be on the alert. Park in the lane over there and keep all the lights switched off. Don't get out of the car till I return."

"Don't take too long," said Pichaikannu. "Why all this drama? Why didn't you tell the mad old man to come over to your place?"

"That's none of your business," Andiappan snapped, and disappeared into the darkness.

It was well past one in the morning, and pitch dark. He almost tripped and fell into the recently dug pit. He didn't knock on the front door right away. Instead, he walked around the back of the dark house and knocked on a window pane, and then went back to the front door. Ranjit Singh had the door ajar.

"Oh, it's you! What a surprise to see you at this hour. Welcome in, my friend! I received your telephone message. Unfortunately, once again,

fate was against me." Ranjit Singh spoke in the melodramatic tones of an old stage actor.

"The detective escaped?" Andiappan asked anxiously.

Ranjit Singh fingered his beard and shrugged his shoulders. "He was lucky. I stopped him by placing the red lanterns in his path, and then I emptied his fuel tank. But he escaped death by a hair's breadth."

Andiappan looked around the hall worriedly and whispered, "So what do you think will happen now?"

"Oh, the police will be here soon," replied Ranjit Singh, casually. "They will probably search my house. But what of it? I have killed a few rats and thrown them into the pit. What law can stop me from trapping rats?"

"Did you send our chap after him?"

"I did... but our chap stumbled back, beaten like a fool. In order to bulk up their muscles so much, one cannot work too much with their brains. That's proved to be a handicap for our chap. He has brute strength, but no strategy of attack."

They were now in Ranjit Singh's study. There were oddly-shaped empty beakers for chemicals on the table, and a deck of cards spread out.

"First, Andiappan, tell me what you know about this detective. He came here a few weeks ago about a library book; your driver Pichaikannu happened to be here at the time. I think I must know him from somewhere..."

"He's the one Rajangam Pillai, the advocate, commissioned to find Pavanandhan."

Ranjit Singh's eyebrows jumped up a mile. "The lawyer imagines that *this* gentleman can find that elusive character? How strange!" He broke into uncontrollable guffaws. "This is too funny. I know that Rajangam Pillai is absolutely loyal and committed. So, was our bright detective fast enough to catch Pavanandhan? Maybe he was chasing him on a bullock cart, instead of in a car." Excited, he drummed on the table with bear-like claws. Then, seeing that Andiappan still looked disturbed, he asked gently, "What you do want now, my friend?"

"Money!"

Ranjit Singh opened the table drawer, removed an old tin, pulled out a bunch of notes and handed them to him. "I don't owe you too much anymore. I've already made you quite rich. You have most of my cash already. The day I die, though, you'll become really wealthy."

A shiver ran through Andiappan's body. "Please, don't even mention the word death. Our original plan was solid, but somehow we've deviated from it. Did you…murder anyone?"

"Yes," replied Ranjit Singh, with a smile. "You mean Vedanayagam? He's dead, yes. But the blame won't fall on me. They'll probably call it a suicide. I don't like people who approach the police. The police lack imagination. Just think what would happen if I were to go to them now and file a report?"

Andiappan leapt up in a panic. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Tell me, why should I even go through all this trouble?" Ranjit Singh shrugged carelessly. "I could have stayed back in my palace in Kashmir. Then I wouldn't have this headache with the Madras police."

Suddenly his expression changed. Signaling Andiappan to stay quiet, he listened intently at some noise outside the shut window. "There's someone out there," he warned in a hushed tone.

"Could it be our chap?"

"No," Ranjit Singh said. Cautiously, he opened the door and stepped outside. When he returned he held a telephone receiver with a long wire dangling from it.

"Someone was eavesdropping on us. Did you come here by car?"

"No. I walked. I told you."

"Looks like your driver can walk, too. Who do you think dropped this?" Ranjit Singh pulled a chauffeur's cap from his pocket.

"It can't be Pichaikannu's. He's my wife's nephew."

"Oh, and he's so fond of her he would never dream of disobeying her, is that what you think? Andiappan, you have a spy working for you!"

"Impossible! What do you know about Pichaikannu?"

"What do *you* know about him, except that he was a car thief, and the police were always looking out for him? Were you aware that he knew our detective from before?"

Andiappan walked out without another word and hurried to where his car was parked. His driver was inside, fast asleep. He sat up, startled, at Andiappan's call.

"Pichaikannu, did you stay in the car all this while, or did you follow me?"

"Why would I want to follow you?"

"You're trying to cheat me. You'll regret this later."

"I've done nothing to be ashamed of. Please get in. It's going to start raining again."

Pichaikannu drove as if he was possessed. At the house, Andiappan got out, slammed the door shut and barked, "Pichaikannu, you think too highly of yourself. You seem to be under the impression that you're indispensable to me…"

Pichaikannu did not feel obliged to wait for him to finish; he sped off to the garage.

The Lawyer's Tension; Prabakaran's Plan

Prabakaran arrived as Rajangam Pillai was finishing his breakfast.

"I came because I held back some important information from you."

"You sound serious."

"It is serious. It's only fair to tell you," said Prabakaran, and told him about the blotting paper he had found in Tokyo. "This clearly shows that Pavanandhan was in touch with Dr. Andiappan. I'm not sure what's behind it all, but I think this is the reason Pavanandhan is avoiding Chennai."

"Dr. Andiappan, uh?" Rajangam Pillai asked, wrinkling his brow. "I remember that name."

"I found out that he bought a farm from Pavanandhan in Singapore."

"That's it! There was a report in the *Singapore Herald* that there were gold veins under that land. But I don't think he's met Pavanandhan."

"Then why were they writing to each other?"

"Maybe Pavanandhan was just replying to Andiappan's letter."

"But when I asked him if they knew each other, he denied having ever communicated with Pavanandhan. Oh, there's another thing," said Prabakaran, and took the strange key out of the bag. "Have you seen anything like this before?"

"What is it? A key? Where did you get this from?"

"I found it in a book that I borrowed—a record of Pavanandhan's travel itinerary over the past eight months," Prabakaran said without batting an eyelid. "It clearly recorded the date he left Tokyo, the date he arrived in Colombo, and the date he left for Durban. Did you handle the sale deed in Singapore?"

"Yes. I had my secretary do the whole thing."

"Do you know a person called Ranjit Singh who lives in Rutland Gate?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Rajangam. "In fact, that Rutland Gate bungalow is part of Pavanandhan's estate. Actually, I think Andiappan is one of our tenants too. Pavanandhan's estate is huge; I don't handle all this stuff personally. I haven't seen Ranjit Singh in ages. I remember that the police filed a case against him once because he brutally cut up some animals for his research. He's that totally unkempt, scruffy fellow?"

"Exactly!"

"What's he up to now?"

"I'll have to explain it from the beginning." Though Prabakaran had a few theories about Pavanandhan, he didn't think it was wise to give everything away. So he gave a concise report on what had happened since he started work on the case.

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

"Don't forget, I *was* the police not too long ago. I'll consult with Duraisami soon."

"Who's Duraisami?"

"An investigative inspector. He was my boss. Tell me, what does Ranjit Singh do for his income?"

"I have no clue. He's supposed to be some kind of a surgeon, but no civilized society would accept his experiments. I think Hell's Haven was rented to him on Dr. Andiappan's recommendation. Just wait for a

second, please." Rajangam left and returned with a file. "See for yourself. Andiappan bought the Singapore property very recently, and just a month later we had rented out Hell's Haven."

Prabakaran had learned more than he had expected to. He left for his house on Anderson Road. There he packed two suitcases with his clothes. Then he called for the cook.

"Take the next month off. Here's your pay in advance. Make a pilgrimage to Kasi if you want, but whatever you do, don't come back here till I call you."

"But why, sir?"

He warned her it could be dangerous if she were to return to the house that month. Next, he instructed the post office to hand over his letters to the police commissioner's office. His investigation was at a crucial turning point, and he had not discussed his next plans with anyone, not even Rajangam Pillai.

12

Maheshwari's House; The Tale of the Tombs

Maheshwari lived with her mother on Spur Tank Road.

The mother was a beautiful and worldly-wise woman. While her husband was alive, they had owned acres of fertile land in Chengalpettu, a large bungalow in Mylapore, several race horses, and a small yacht. Unexpectedly and overnight, they had lost all their wealth. The managing director of the concern where her husband was a director had, one fine day, absconded with all the money. He was eventually caught and sentenced to prison, but the loss to the customers had to be compensated by Maheshwari's father, who sold everything he owned. A few days after he had paid all the debts and regained his pride, he died of a heart attack.

All that was left for Maheshwari and her mother was the tiny house they now lived in. They had rented out the ground floor of the house, and lived on the first floor.

That evening, after work, Maheshwari was concentrating at her writing desk. Her mother was engrossed in a horror novel.

Then, slowly, she lowered her book. "Maheshwari, it was stupid of you to make that trip to Manamadurai," she said. "I should have stopped you. I still can't believe the danger you put yourself in."

"Amma, tell me about that gardener, Panchanadham."

"Panchanadham? He was your father's loyal servant. When your father lost his money, he got him a job as the head gardener at Ramanandhan's estate. Ramanandhan was a cruel landlord. Once he tied Panchanadham to a tree and walloped the life out of him. Do you remember that brutal man?"

"I do. I remember his booming voice, his huge handlebar moustache and those permanently bloodshot eyes. I used to be terrified of him."

The mother went back to her book for a few moments, and then asked, "So how is that other man?"

Realizing that this time it was Prabakaran she was asking about, Maheshwari said, "Amma, this is the fourth time you've asked me. I don't know him very well. All I can say is that he was very decent to me. He's smart, intelligent, and trustworthy... He can play the fool at times, though."

The mother flipped through her book distractedly. "What does he do?"

Maheshwari hesitated a second. "I don't know," she said. "I know he was with the police not long ago. Tell me, Amma, what social status does a detective hold?"

"Perhaps about the same as a library assistant. I'm sorry for being nosy."

Maheshwari sprang from her seat, rushed over and hugged her mother tight. "Just because I spoke to him on the train, don't start wondering if I've fallen in love with him. I found him interesting, that's all. It was fearsome the way he dealt with those rowdies at Egmore Railway Station. But he was very gentle with me. When he got my purse back, I wanted to shake his hand. Still, I'm not in love with him. He's probably already married, anyway."

There was a loud knock on the door. Maheshwari opened it to find Prabakaran standing there.

"Come in, please," she welcomed him bashfully.

When he stepped in he noticed a certain satisfaction spread over the mother's face.

"Are you Prabakaran?" the mother asked politely. "I'm very grateful for the help you gave my daughter."

"I was wondering what I should say. Thanks for breaking the ice," he replied with a smile, and then turned to Maheshwari. "You told me that globetrotter, Pavanandhan, was related to you. Does he have any other relatives?"

"Except my mother and me, none that I know of. Of course, he could be married by now."

Prabakaran was looking concerned. "That's what I suspected. I'm still not sure how you are connected to this case, but I'm sure there *is* a connection. Do you have any friends in Chengalpettu?"

"Yes, we do. Why?" Maheshwari's mother asked, puzzled.

"And do you have a telephone at home?" Seeing the black instrument in the corner, he continued, "Would you be able to leave the city on five minutes' notice? I was even thinking of asking you to start off immediately, but maybe that's not necessary."

Maheshwari felt her heart start racing.

"Can you please explain yourself?" her mother demanded.

"Unfortunately, I can't say anything for sure yet. I only have some hunches, nothing confirmed. There's probably no real danger for the two of you, and no one is going to trouble you any more. Still, it doesn't hurt to be cautious."

"This has to with that strange key, right?" Maheshwari asked.

"Right," Prabakaran confirmed. "Tell me, what kind of a person was Ramanandhan?"

The older woman paused a moment before she spoke. "He was not a good man. An alcoholic. He was the reason for several tragic incidents which I'm too decent to discuss. He came from a line of degenerates. The previous generation was excommunicated from our caste, and refused the right to use our local cremation ground. They found another

place for themselves, where they could bury their dead. It's called the *Samaadhi Kaadu*—the Jungle of Tombs. Have you heard of it?"

Prabakaran shook his head. It took a moment for the significance of the name to strike him. Tombs! His thoughts flew to Vedanayagam. *His last job was breaking into a tomb. Then he was killed.*

"Where is this place?" he asked.

"It's by the lake in Nungambakkam. It's in a thick shrub forest."

"Is there a caretaker?"

"I think so. There's a small hut in one corner of the place where the caretaker and his wife live," explained Maheshwari's mother. "I remember Rajangam Pillai telling me that Pavanandhan wanted to sell the place, but he didn't know what to do with the crypts there."

"Did you know Pavanandhan?" asked Prabakaran.

"I met him just once, when he was still a schoolboy. Since then, he has written to me a few times. I even got one letter recently." Maheshwari's mother brought out a letter from the cupboard and gave it to Prabakaran. It read:

Dear Chinnamma,

Please forgive me for my long silence. I am a little ashamed to even write this one. I hope you are doing fine. I know you like chinaware, so I bought you a lovely teapot.

Yours, Thambikannu

It was the same handwriting that Prabakaran had seen on the letters at Rajangam's office.

"Here's another one; this came almost a year back, during our time of trials," said Maheshwari's mother, handing over another letter.

This one was written from a hotel in Colombo. It read:

...I am very sorry to hear about your troubles. I really do want to help you. Feel free to ask for any financial help you may require. You may go to Rajangam Pillai with this letter. He has already been told to assist you.

"But I didn't go to Rajangam at that point," said Maheshwari's mother. "Now tell me why you wanted us to be ready to leave the city on such short notice."

Having listened for a long time without interrupting, Maheshwari butted in now. "I'm sure Prabakaran has good reasons, Amma. We will be prepared, Prabakaran. The key is definitely involved, isn't it?"

"Yes, but there's more. I'll explain when I have all the details." He turned to the mother and asked, "Do you know someone by the name of Ranjit Singh?"

At once, she shook her head.

"Or Dr. Andiappan?"

She thought for a moment longer before answering in a certain tone, "I've never heard of either of them."

13

The Strange Hand in the Dark

When Prabakaran set off from Maheshwari's house, there were two men walking behind him. He worried that he was being followed; fear of impending death gripped his heart. Just ahead was a cab. The driver motioned Prabakaran to get in, but he declined. He was expecting danger, and felt he could it face it better in the open than in a strange cab. But when another taxi passed him a few yards further on, Prabakaran changed his mind. He stopped it, got in, and told the driver to go Hotel Merry Land in Mylapore. He noticed the two men hail another cab behind him. At the hotel, he got himself a room and took the key, but left unnoticed out the back of the building. Then he went via Royapettah High Road to the police commissioner's office and reported to Inspector Duraisami.

"You're sure you didn't imagine all this?" asked Duraisami, incredulously. Then he called in a deputy, and arranged for two men to be posted at Maheshwari's house, and for another detective to follow Prabakaran—even to stay in his room while he slept.

"Inform the Nungambakkam police that we'll be coming tomorrow night to inspect Hell's Haven. Tell them to be on the alert, in case I need their help." When the deputy left he turned to Prabakaran and said, "I'm on my way home. Let's go to your place first."

"Please, you don't need to trouble yourself."

"Just a moment. Did you say you were attacked by a naked man at Hell's Haven?"

"A nearly naked man, yes."

"Looks like Ranjit Singh is back to his old games. I almost caught him three months ago."

"What old games are those?"

"'Human metamorphosis'... He believes that if he can isolate a two- or three-year-old child and rear it like a wild animal, never setting its brains to work and concentrating only on building up its muscles, the child will grow up to be a savage beast—never want to wear clothes or learn to speak. I think you were assaulted by one such being. When I go to Ranjit Singh's house tomorrow, if I find some brutish, naked *thing*, he's had it from me."

It was dark when Prabakaran left the commissioner's office. He kept himself well hidden from any strange eyes till he reached his home. All the doors were closed, and all the curtains drawn; he had left it that way before going out. So when he switched on the light, it was not visible from the street. He carefully checked every room. Everything was just as he had left it; nothing had been disturbed. When he reached his wardrobe, he thought of Vedanayagam and his weird task in the tomb. He sat up until about two going through his records, then switched off the light, opened his window wide, and scanned the dark night.

The sky was clear and the sliver of a moon cast a light glow. The breeze was cool and brisk. Prabakaran lay on his bed.

He was a very light sleeper, and even the slightest of noise was enough to wake him. That night he sat up startled, not very sure what had woken him up. Perhaps it was the window shutters fluttering in the wind. But that was a familiar sound; he was used to it. The moon was dimly illuminating his bedroom door. Even as he thoughtfully gazed at it, it opened.

There was a hairy, grotesque hand on the door handle. Even in the dim light he could see that the hand was beastly looking, the thumb flat and heavily calloused. It was devilish.

The next instant, Prabakaran noiselessly rolled off his bed to the floor and lay still against the wall, seconds before the thing sprang on his bed with a bloodcurdling roar. Prabakaran, normally a fearless person, felt his heart freeze at the bellow. He smoothly removed his revolver from under his pillow and then jumped up to switch on the light. When he turned around, the room was empty. There was no one there. The bedroom door was wide open.

He ran into the living room. The front door was locked, but the kitchen window was open and a rope ladder was gently swinging from the bar. As he peered out, he heard a car rev its engine in the distance and drive away. He looked at the clock; it was past four. He pulled up the rope ladder. Vedanayagam's murderer must have gotten in the same way! He noticed that the knots in the ladder were sloppily tied.

The sun had fully risen before Prabakaran went back to bed. This time he fell sound asleep.

14

In the Hall of Tombs

The telephone jingled on the bedside, and Prabakaran rolled over and picked up the receiver. When he heard the voice at the other end, he sat up surprised.

"You? I didn't expect you to call so early!"

A peal of laughter rang through the line. "So you guessed it was me, eh? Very smart," giggled Maheshwari.

"Any trouble?" he asked, concerned.

She did not reply immediately. After a short pause, she said, "I wanted to talk to you."

"Come over."

By the time Maheshwari arrived, he had finished his morning ablutions and was eagerly awaiting her arrival.

The first thing that caught her eye was the rope ladder on the living room floor.

"What's this doing here?"

"My mode of escape in case of an accidental fire," he grinned. "I can't sleep peacefully without this next to me."

"You've had breakfast?"

"It's almost twelve—too late for that. I'll have an early lunch. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"My mother and I chatted for a long time after you left last night," she said. "You don't have to feel bad about scaring us like that. You were doing your duty. I met Rajangam Pillai this morning and told him about the key. He wanted me to go to the police at once; he even started making the call. I had to plead to make him stop. But I gave him an idea, which quite shocked him."

"What was that?"

"I'm not going to tell you as yet. I don't want to spoil the surprise. Do you have a car?"

Prabakaran nodded.

"Can three people travel in it comfortably?"

"Sure. But who is the third person?"

"Rajangam Pillai... We're going to the Samaadhi Kaadu."

Prabakaran gave a wide smile. "You must have read my mind, Maheshwari. I was planning to go there myself tonight."

"You won't be able to get into the tombs if you go alone. Also, it might be dangerous. My mother is not too happy about this adventure. Fortunately Rajangam Pillai, who knows the place, has agreed to come along. We'll meet him at half past two and head off. Don't forget to bring that key."

"I shall be there with both the keys!"

She rose to leave.

"You haven't told me your bright idea yet," Prabakaran reminded her.

"You'll know by this afternoon," she replied teasingly.

That afternoon Prabakaran had his lunch, collected the keys from the bank locker, and arrived at Maheshwari's house. She was ready and waiting for him.

"Do you have the keys?" she asked. He nodded. "My mother is really upset about this. Anything having to do with Ramanandhan distresses her."

"Can I know about your idea now?"

"In time, wait! You haven't even asked me why I'm not at work," she laughed. "Today is the birth anniversary of the library founder. So we have a rare holiday!"

They picked up Rajangam Pillai at his residence.

"So Prabakaran, Mr. World-Famous Detective, what do you think of Maheshwari's idea?" he asked with a grin.

"I still don't know what it is!"

"I'm due for my monthly visit to check on the maintenance of the Samaadhi Kaadu," Rajangam Pillai said. "That's the reason I agreed to come. Otherwise, I stay far away from that place."

Soon they were outside the Samaadhi Kaadu. There was a tall compound wall around it, and a huge wooden gate at the entrance, worn by years of exposure to the rain and sun. It was locked. Prabakaran honked the car horn. An old woman came from within and opened the gate for them. They parked next to the gate and got out. Though the place was very green with huge trees and thick shrubs, it had a gloomy look about it. The sky was overcast and the trees stood still. Not a leaf stirred. In the distance were flashes of lighting and a rumble of thunder.

They walked along a mud path towards the tombs. "Looks like it's going to pour," said Rajangam Pillai, looking up at the dark sky. "This mound is named after Pavanandhan's great-grandfather, Devanandhan. The tombs are in the underground hall beneath the mound."

At the top of the mound was the passage to go down, barred off with a heavy wrought iron door set in the ground at an angle. Prabakaran could see that in spite of the thick coat of rust, the door was strong. Rajangam Pillai lit a lantern he had brought along, took out an ancient

key from his pocket, and opened the lock on the door. It opened with a loud creak. The passage was dark.

"I'll go down first. You two follow me. Be careful," said Rajangam Pillai, and started climbing down. The steps were covered with moss. Maheshwari went in second, followed by Prabakaran. He counted the steps as he descended—twelve of them in all. They ended up in a small chamber with another iron gate. Rajangam Pillai used the same key to open it. That led into a huge hall. There were a dozen tombs, each six feet square, and rising about three feet from the ground. In the front of each was a small padlocked door of Burma teak, and a tiny platform for oil lamps. The tombs were arranged on either side of the hall, with a long passage in the middle. At the end of the passage was another tomb, much larger than the others.

Rajangam Pillai raised the lantern high, pointed to the large tomb and said, "This is what Maheshwari wanted to see—the tomb with the seven locks!"

Prabakaran examined the door in the front, which had seven keyholes in it. In a flash he knew that this strange door was the one Vedanayagam had been employed to open. He gently knocked on it; it was heavy and solid.

"Whose tomb is this?" he asked.

"This is Devanandhan's tomb."

"What's inside it?"

"I have no idea. I do know that Ramanandhan rebuilt this door during his time. He had it ordered from a German company. Whatever is in there is kept in a huge wooden trunk."

"How do you know that?" asked Maheshwari.

There was a six-inch long, two-inch tall slot in the top of the door, covered by a sliding piece of tin. Rajangam Pillai opened it. Prabakaran shone his torch through the slot and peeked in. The interior was thick with dust and moss; the wooden trunk stood on a platform.

"I don't know what's in it. But when Ramanandhan rebuilt the door, he opened the trunk, and I believe he said there was nothing important."

Suddenly the gloomy room was lit by a flash of light from the passageway. Scared, Maheshwari threw herself around Prabakaran with a scream.

"Lightning," said Rajangam, his face impassive. "It will be pouring by the time we get out of here."

A loud roll of thunder followed, almost making the mound shudder. The repeated electric flashes added to the bizarre feeling of standing in the hall of tombs. Maheshwari started to tremble. The blood drained from her frightened face.

"Don't worry. This racket will stop soon," Prabakaran comforted her.

Just then there was a deafening crash.

"Lightning has struck somewhere close by," observed Prabakaran.

A thud followed, from above them. Prabakaran ran up the steps. He found that the iron door had been banged shut, and there were two giant footsteps outside on the wet ground. Prabakaran stood, shocked, staring at the shut door.

15

Death Lurks Near the Tombs

Maheshwari and Rajangam Pillai came up behind Prabakaran, looking anxious. The advocate shook the door and found that it was locked fast.

"What's happening here?" he demanded angrily.

Prabakaran pulled out his revolver and shot twice through the iron grillwork at a figure he glimpsed in the bushes beyond. The downpour was heavy. He could make out a monstrous arm in the lightning. He fired again.

"Oh please don't... Don't shoot!" Maheshwari begged, close to tears.

Prabakaran pocketed the revolver and asked Pillai, "Do you have your key with you?"

The advocate took out the key from his pocket and handed it over. Prabakaran squeezed his hand through the grill and opened the door. He told them quietly, "You two go ahead. I have some work to finish."

He ran towards the bush where he thought he had seen the monster's arm. Behind the thicket he almost tripped over a steel pipe, the kind that the city municipality authorities used to gas stray dogs. There were drops of blood on it. Beside it lay a long rubber tube. So that was the plan – shut them up in the mound and pump in gas!

Prabakaran realized there was no point hunting for the monster anymore, and sprinted towards the car. The other two stood there under a tree, looking deathly pale.

"What happened? What were you shooting at?" asked Rajangam.

Not wanting to add to their panic, Prabakaran brushed the question aside. "I got nervous; I think I just imagined I saw something and took a pot-shot."

He left them in the watchman's hut and went back to the hall of tombs. The constant downpour and the tall dark trees made the area look eerie. The wounded monster was nowhere in sight. At the mound he opened the door and snapped his handcuffs around the lock so it could not be shut again. Then he switched on his torch, went back down the steps, and approached the tomb with the seven keyholes. He tried one of the strange keys in each of the holes. There was a faint click in the fourth hole, but the door wouldn't budge. Then he tried the second key, which worked in the seventh hole. He turned both the keys together. Still, the door would not open.

Prabakaran could see the problem now. All seven keys had to be used simultaneously for the door to open. He peeked in through the slot again, but could see nothing new. He pocketed the keys, came out of the hall, locked the inner gate, went up the steps and locked the outer door. Then he noticed that the gas pipe was lying just ten feet away from where he stood. Earlier it had been at least fifty feet away.

He flung the steel pipe as far as he could. So something was still around. It had been following him, silently—hunting him. For a moment, he felt the urge to run. His hands were trembling. Then, ashamed and irritated with himself, he walked determinedly forward

into the overgrowth and peered through the trees. If his adversary was still hiding here, let him meet him face to face. He would not be scared. He was ready for anything.

But there was no one to be seen. After some time he turned again and walked back to the others.

Seven keys to open a dilapidated tomb, five of them still missing. The missing keys now posed a threat to both his and Maheshwari's life. The past three days had exposed him to the strangest of perils.

Prabakaran was familiar with the world of criminals and their thought processes. He had grown up in the company of thieves. He could think ahead of them. But this latest encounter was a little too supernatural for his rational mind. Even if he did succeed in nabbing the monster, what charge was he going to book him under? Poor Vedanayagam; the world may have seen him as a criminal, but how he must have suffered in the hall of tombs!

Maheshwari gave a sigh of relief when she saw him approaching.

"Did you find out who locked us in?" asked Rajangam Pillai. "Was he hurt?"

"No, I couldn't find him. Yes, I think he's hurt, but not mortally so."

"You should have shot him dead," growled Rajangam Pillai.

The three got into the car, but no one was in a mood for polite chitchat. They remained silent until they got to the advocate's house. Rajangam Pillai cleared his throat and said, "I think I was not as frightened by what I did see tonight, as what we didn't see." He got out of the car. "But let's discuss it in the morning. Good night."

Prabakaran, still silent, dropped off Maheshwari at her home, and then drove to his. He changed into some dry clothes and headed over to Inspector Duraisami's place.

"I'm sorry to trouble you so late. But I had to tell you something."

Duraisami seemed undisturbed, which surprised Prabakaran a bit, until a constable entered the room, saluted and said, "We've got a warrant to inspect Dr. Ranjit Singh's house tonight at ten."

"I thought you were going at eleven?" asked Prabakaran, taken aback.

"I want to be there before the Nungambakkam police get there," Duraisami sighed. "As a detective, you should know this, Prabakaran: You can't trust anyone. Did you reveal our plans to anyone?"

"Well, yes, a bit... to Rajangam Pillai and to Maheshwari," Prabakaran replied, uncomfortably.

"Well, telling the advocate is okay," Duraisami countered, with a smile. "But the woman? Hmm, Prabakaran, you still have a lot learn. Never trust a woman! That is the first commandment for a policeman. Tell a secret to a woman and it'll be passed on to every ear that visits the house. I know women well!"

"Did you tell anyone?" asked Prabakaran curiously.

"No one except the commissioner... well, and my wife. But my wife is a different sort. Also, she has a bad toothache. It's too painful for her to speak. Women with toothaches don't tell secrets. Note that down too."

Prabakaran gave his report on what had happened at the hall of tombs.

"Hmm... a strange door with seven keyholes. Seven keys, but we have only two of them. Why don't we bring the door down with dynamite?" asked Duraisami.

"Because it's too risky! The whole mound might collapse," countered Prabakaran. "I tried my handiwork at opening the locks too. Nothing worked. I think even Vedanayagam realized that this was beyond him."

"Oh God, I forgot about Vedanayagam. Give me the keys; let me see what I can make out of them."

Prabakaran handed over the keys. The inspector examined them for a long time, not saying a word. Then he looked up at Prabakaran and said, "I have a feeling they expected you alone at the graveyard. You must have spoiled their plans by coming along with the advocate and that woman. I can't say why I'm so sure of that, but I am. Alright, Prabakaran, let's meet tonight at Ranjit Singh's place. But please leave your pistol behind. Remember, you're no longer a part of the police force. You really have no authority to be there in the first place."

16

The Demonic Creatures in the Scientist's Lab

It was half past nine when Prabakaran's car silently rolled up near Dr. Ranjit Singh's Hell's Haven, and came to a halt a few furlongs away. Prabakaran switched off all the car lights and waited for the police to enter first. In a few seconds, a police van sped past him, and Prabakaran followed it.

Hell's Haven was shrouded in complete darkness. It looked just as terrifying and mysterious as the last time Prabakaran had seen it. Inspector Duraisami was already knocking on the front door when Prabakaran got out of the car and went up to the house. Several other police officers were waiting behind him. Who knew what secrets would come to light this night?

Promptly, Dr. Ranjit Singh opened the door wide. "Come in," he welcomed them cheerfully. "I was expecting you. The gentleman behind you is the one who ran out of gas near here, isn't he? Welcome, my friends; welcome to my humble laboratory.

"Would you like to see my formal sitting room?" he asked, moving to the room that Prabakaran had been the last time.

"No, we only want to see your work space," said Duraisami. The scientist led them to the rear part of the house.

"I don't mean this room," Duraisami stopped him. "I mean the one on the first floor."

Ranjit Singh shrugged nonchalantly, and after a brief hesitation led them up the steps to a small hall with three doors. Prabakaran and Duraisami headed for the door on their left. The room there was full of junk and broken furniture. The next door led to the scientist's bedroom. There was a huge steel almirah in one corner. The scientist walked up to it, opened it, and asked with a smirk, "Do you want to check this?"

Duraisami was silent; he merely pointed to another, smaller cupboard. After a quick search turned up nothing, they moved to the third door. That was a bedroom too, with two beds. Along the wall was a pile of old rolled-up carpets.

As they came down the steps, Ranjit Singh said mockingly, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Inspector. I am sure you came here tonight expecting to find beast-children. I can just imagine you telling yourself, 'That Ranjit Singh has gone back to his old ways. He must have actually created one of those weird creatures he writes about. This time, I'll lock him up forever!'"

"You yap too much, Ranjit!" growled Duraisami.

"Why shouldn't I talk? It's not as though I have frequent visitors. I go for weeks without hearing a human voice. Do you know what torture it is? You've provided me some diversion tonight. I'm very grateful," the scientist continued in his light tone as he opened the room at the rear end of the house. "*This* is my laboratory."

The lab had two windows, high up near the ceiling. There was a long table, topped with many scientific journals and papers. There were two cupboards full of bottles and jars of chemicals. In one corner was a smaller table with a measuring scale, magnifying glass, a box of surgical instruments, and other sundry laboratory equipment. At the other end of the room was an operating table with a dead rat lying in the middle of it, its four legs spread out and pinned down.

"Here," laughed Ranjit Singh, "is this poor scientist's entertainment room. And yes, that thing on the top table *is* a rat! But it was dead already; I don't use living things for my experiments anymore. You'll never know how much pleasure I find in this room. You wouldn't be able to survive even a week with all these chemicals."

"Who else is here in the house with you?" asked Duraisami.

"I live alone," he replied. "You saw for yourself. I never even have any guests."

"Prabakaran said he heard a terrible scream the night he was here."

"Perhaps he imagined it."

"He was also attacked by a half-naked monster. Was that his imagination too? If so, he must have a fertile one," said Duraisami. "Why are there beddings for four in the bedrooms?"

"I'm always hoping that some friend will drop in to stay over. But poor me! No one comes. I live alone. You are welcome to be my guest here for a week, even a month, and see for yourself. Better still, appoint

one of your officers to watch me at all times. You'll learn how lonely I am."

"Fine," grunted Duraisami and prepared to leave.

Dr. Ranjit Singh stood in the doorway till the police officers turned the street corner. Then he shut and locked the front door. He walked casually up to the first floor. In his room he opened a drawer in the smaller table and took out a long, vicious-looking whip. Then he opened the steel almirah, reached to the back, and pressed a concealed button. A secret door at the back of the almirah opened with a creak.

The room behind it was pitch dark. The scientist stared into the blackness and said sternly in Punjabi, "Go to bed; it's time to sleep."

A mysterious form that had been huddled in the corner now rose and slowly moved towards him. It was gigantic, a head taller than the scientist; it resembled a prehistoric man, something that could have been the missing link. It wore no clothing except for a torn pair of shorts.

"Go to your room," ordered the scientist. "I'll get your milk and food." He stood a few steps away from the creature, and violently cracked the whip.

Obediently, the monster went back into its room. The scientist locked the door and went down to the rear part of the building. He still had the whip with him. He went out the back door into the garden, humming a tune. He stood under a tree and whistled. Yet another monster leapt down from the tree and knelt slavishly at the scientist's feet.

"Room... milk... sleep!" said the scientist, cracking the whip again. The second monster hurried into the house and up the stairs. Ranjit Singh followed it unhurriedly.

In a little while, he went up with two buckets of milk in one hand and two plates of raw meat in the other. He made sure that the two monsters were in separate rooms, both fed and asleep; then he locked the rooms and went down to his lab. All thoughts of the police visit or his two strange slaves were gone from his mind. He was preoccupied with his latest experiment.

17

The Second Heir's Invitation

Rajangam Pillai was reading over the letter for the third time when Prabakaran walked in.

"I'm sorry to have called you in so early, Prabakaran," the advocate welcomed him. "I know I said your job was over once you returned from your trip abroad. But I received a letter this morning. Please read it." He handed over the letter. It was posted from Nairobi and written on a hotel letterhead. It read:

Dear Rajangam Pillai,

I received your telegram about Dr. Andiappan. I know him very well, and so I cannot understand why he would feign ignorance of me. Perhaps he does not want any third parties to know about his business dealings. Some time back, he had written to me for a loan of seventy-five thousand rupees. I was not willing to lend him that large an amount. His letter also said that his situation in Chennai was very bad, and there was someone threatening to kill him. He wanted to leave the town forever. I had completely forgotten about all that, but now I think what he told me then might have been true.

Coming to my point, I need fifty thousand rupees immediately. Send it to Paris, France, to my usual hotel there.

Yours truly,
Thambikannu

"Do you always send him the money he asks for?" inquired Prabakaran.

"Of course!"

"Then you're going to give this large an amount?"

"I can't really make out why he wants it," replied the advocate, biting his lips. "It's confusing. My chief clerk wants me to ask Pavanandhan to employ a different firm and relieve me from all this. It's too much responsibility. What happened last night has scared me, and I've decided to

wash my hands of this account. Though it means a big loss, financially. I was earning over twelve hundred a month just from this one account."

Prabakaran was stunned at this piece of information. "Is the estate really that large?"

"Yes, and unfortunately its value keeps going up every day. It will soon become too big for my firm to handle it on our own."

"Did Pavanandhan's father, Ramanandhan, leave behind any sort of treasure?"

"Nothing except what he left as cash in the bank. That was seventeen lakhs. But he had bought land in a lot of places, and the value of those properties has gone sky high now. I know you asked that question because you're thinking of that extraordinary tomb with the seven locks. But I can't imagine what could be in there that's so valuable. I've checked every possible record. If we got Pavanandhan's permission, we could break the seven locks and solve the mystery. I never thought it was necessary, so I never asked him. Prabakaran, aren't you an expert at picking locks?"

"It's true that I can break open most locks. But I don't think my expertise will be good enough for those seven," said Prabakaran. "They're too much for me. But tell me; are there any other heirs to this estate?"

"There is one," responded Rajangam Pillai. "It's Maheshwari. If Pavanandhan were to die without any children, then everything goes to her." Rajangam Pillai took back the letter again. "Hmm. I was thinking of sending Pavanandhan's money to Paris through you…"

"Stop right there!" intervened Prabakaran. "I've had quite enough of chasing that man from country to country. Have you ever sent him this large an amount before?"

"Most of the seventeen lakhs that was in the bank has been sent like this," said the advocate. "Pavanandhan has bought property across the world. I don't have any of the records. I did try asking him about it a couple of times. He just said they were safe."

"Before I leave here, I want to ask again: You're sure there's no possibility these letters are forged?"

"No chance. I know Pavanandhan's handwriting."

"It couldn't be someone impersonating him?"

"I thought of that too. I even imagined that someone else might be demanding the money while holding him captive," said the advocate. "But it's not possible; Pavanandhan has a long, slim face, with a red scar near his ear. I've met him a few times over the years. I'm confident that he's alive in some foreign land and spending his money himself. I can't do anything to prevent it. What right do I have to stop a rich heir from touring the world?"

"None whatsoever!" Prabakaran replied without hesitation.

There was another storm about to rage through Maheshwari's life.

At work at Malaimel Vinayagar Library, she would pore over those impenetrable books whenever she got the chance. The library expanded her knowledge vastly, but all that book learning did nothing to help her solve her most important problem. It did not help her to understand the feelings she was having towards Prabakaran. Sometimes she thought she simply liked him a lot; at other times, she was madly in love with him. Now she wondered why she had even ventured into the Samaadhi Kaadu with him. What had made her throw herself at him? Was it just the fear?

Malaimel Vinayagar Library had very few women visitors. So when a woman entered the library that day, Maheshwari was surprised. This new woman was very fat, dressed in loud expensive clothes and makeup, and engulfed in perfume, but had an incongruously vulgar, grating way of speaking. She seemed terribly out of place in the library.

With no preamble, she demanded, "Are you Maheshwari?"

Maheshwari rose from her chair and asked politely, "Yes, can I help you find a book?"

"Oh, I never read books," the woman said breezily. "Too many books can ruin a person's mind. If only my husband Dr. Andiappan had done something useful instead of wasting all his time reading books, he'd have made it really big by now." She was referring to her husband by name, something an Indian woman would never dream of doing. And she seemed to think nothing of it.

"Please sit down," said Maheshwari, slightly taken aback.

The woman sat down and continued in her loud voice, "I am Ammaniammal. My husband was a very good friend of your father's. That was many years back, of course. This morning he told me, if I was going out, I should stop by this place. He's the one who gave me the address." She pulled out a piece of paper with the library's address from her leather bag. The scribble on the paper was so illegible that no one else could have possibly made anything out of it.

"My husband wanted me to invite you for tea. He has something really interesting to share with you, about your father."

Maheshwari sat listening, dumbstruck, though her curiosity was piqued. Who was this woman? What kind of a doctor was her husband?

As if reading her thoughts, Ammaniammal said, "My husband's not a medical doctor. Lots of people make that mistake. No, he has a doctorate in literature, from an American university. So *Doctor* Andiappan really means *Professor* Andiappan. Anyway, coming to the point. I have to warn you: you have many enemies." Suddenly she dropped her voice and continued in a hushed tone, "Maheshwari, my husband doesn't want you to tell anyone about this invitation. I've brought my car along. If you come with me now, I can drop you back in an hour. But for now, keep this under your hat. Don't discuss it with anyone."

"Why? Why do I need to keep your invitation a secret?" demanded Maheshwari. She sensed there was something weird going on, but could not tell what it was.

"Because my husband does not want your enemies to know about it," said Ammaniammal. "They're not just watching you. They're also watching that Malayalee friend of yours."

"Which Malayalee? Prabakaran?" asked Maheshwari, beginning to believe the woman really knew something.

"Exactly! There's already been one attempt on that ex-cop's life. Maybe he didn't tell you about that. Next time, they'll have his head."

Maheshwari eyed the telephone on the table, and then asked nervously, "But what has my father got to do with all this?"

"Only my husband can answer that question."

Maheshwari studied Ammaniammal more carefully. She was definitely not born to the class that she now advertised, with her heavy jewels, the diamond earrings that flashed blindingly every time she swirled around, and the gemstones on almost every finger. Finally Maheshwari asked, "Where is your house?"

"In Kodambakkam, not very far from here," Ammaniammal replied, checking her watch. "I'll wait for you outside. My car is the blue one. Finish up your work and come."

"You don't need to wait for me. I can get there by myself."

"It's no trouble at all! I can pass the time in the car, watching people on the street. Come as quickly as you can. Just wait till you meet my husband this evening; you'll be grateful to him for the rest of your life," Ammaniammal said enthusiastically, and left the library.

Maheshwari called home, but her mother was not in. Next she tried Prabakaran but couldn't reach him either. At four, she left the library and walked to the car park.

The driver drove the car right up to her, and Ammaniammal opened the rear door. Maheshwari got in and immediately rolled down a window, for the strong smell of perfume was suffocating.

"Did you call your mother?" asked Ammaniammal, looking at her from the corner of her eye.

"I did. She wasn't at home."

"Did you inform your servant?"

"We can't afford servants," replied Maheshwari with a wry laugh. "My mother and I do all the house work."

Sounding concerned, Ammaniammal went on, "You didn't tell anyone where you're going? It helps to let someone know, in case something goes wrong."

"No, I haven't told anyone. I tried my friend, but couldn't get him either."

A tiny smile swept across Ammaniammal's lips, then disappeared almost immediately. "You can't be too careful all the time, I suppose. Now relax! Sit comfortably."

Poor Maheshwari was unaware that sitting completely relaxed in the seat meant that she was not visible to anyone outside the car.

18

Ammaniammal's Anger; Maheshwari's Blackout

The car sped towards Kodambakkam. Both Ammaniammal and Maheshwari sat silently, each deep in her own thoughts. After a little while the car pulled into the portico of Dr. Andiappan's bungalow; Andiappan was at the front door, ready to welcome them. Maheshwari did not think she had ever seen this old man before. But he seemed to be overcome by a strong affection at the sight of her.

"Welcome home my child—child of my best friend," he said playfully. "Of course, you don't remember me."

"Pardon me professor," replied Maheshwari with a smile. "But it's true; I don't recall you at all."

"Of course not, my girl. That's only natural," Andiappan said in a fatherly tone. Only Ammaniammal could read his real intentions. She gave him a sharp look.

Ignoring it, Andiappan slung an arm over Maheshwari's shoulder and took her inside. Maheshwari was uncomfortable with his physical touch, but complied silently. The old man's overfamiliarity was strangely threatening.

In the sitting room, Andiappan fussed over her like an old rooster with a young chick. "Ammani," he told his wife, "why don't you get the tea ready." To Maheshwari, he said, "You must be tired after the long ride."

"I am tired, yes," snapped Ammaniammal. She gave him a look and said, "I need to have a word with you, Aavana."

"In a moment, Ammani," he said, and turned back to Maheshwari. "You just relax and be comfortable."

"I'm fine, thank you," replied Maheshwari, aware that Ammaniammal had just slammed the door shut as she left the room. The old man's attention made her uneasy; was it her fault she had been born so good looking? Still, her eagerness to learn more about her father overwhelmed her desire to leave.

When Ammaniammal came out of the sitting room into the hall, Pichaikannu, the driver, was there lighting a cigarette.

"Who's that girl, Athai?" he asked offhandedly.

"The same girl the old man told you about," she retorted. "Pichaikannu, you must stop interfering in our affairs. The old man has already complained about it."

Unheeding, Pichaikannu went on, "I thought it was her. She's beautiful! Athai, I'm surprised that you've left such a lovely young parrot alone with an old hungry cat."

"What do I care what surprises you. Take the car to the shed."

"There's still time for that. Tell me, what's the old man planning now?"

"How should I know?"

"Does Maheshwari have one of those strange keys, too?"

"No, idiot, she doesn't have a key," Ammaniammal barked, "and stop asking stupid questions. Stay out of this! How do you know about the keys, anyway?"

Pichaikannu looked at her thoughtfully for a long moment, and then said, "You and that old man are a strange couple indeed. I'm not worried about you, though; I'm worried about that pretty young girl. Hmm, looks like I have to make the tea today. The old man has sent both the cook and the servant away for the night." He started to walk off, but at the doorway turned around again and asked, "Now that everyone's gone, what's your next plan, Athai?"

"How many times have I told you, stop calling me your athai. I am no aunt to a jailbird. I'm your boss." Ammaniammal's lips quivered in anger. Pichaikannu knew her well enough to realize that it was not wise to rile her any further. He'd been with this household for seven years, aside from a few short stints in prison. The pay was very good, and he had even had the chance to enjoy a few holiday trips. But he knew how Andiappan had married his young widowed aunt under strange circumstances, and too many other secrets besides. He had to deliberately pretend not to notice the weird goings-on in this household.

The cigarette hung loose from his lips, his eyes almost shut, as he slowly walked towards his "athai".

"What time should I take the pretty woman back home?"

"She's staying here. You don't need to worry about dropping her off."

Pichaikannu looked at the floor, then up at the ceiling, and then carefully all around him and inquired softly, "Does the girl know that she's going to stay here?"

"That's none of your business."

"Actually, I think it *is* my business. I don't know who she is or what kind of a person, but I don't want to be responsible for any monkey tricks that you two are planning for her. I'll have the car ready in an hour to take her back." He sounded very determined.

Ammaniammal chose not to reply, and went up the stairs. He waited until she was out of sight and then went to the kitchen to make tea. His mind traveled back to the bizarre events that taken place twelve years ago. He could not forget how his aunt Ammaniammal had suddenly changed her status from that of an ordinary domestic maid to the second wife of a rich old widower.

Ammaniammal brought the tea into the sitting room. She placed it on the table and left at once. Maheshwari didn't find this strange, for she assumed Andiappan wanted to discuss things with her in private. Three times she had tried to steer the discussion to the subject of her father, but each time the professor had deftly sidestepped it. Before she took her first sip of tea, she made another firm attempt.

This time the professor did not evade the topic. "That is a long story. I cannot tell it all in one setting. I was wondering if we could call your mother over here, and speak about it at leisure."

Maheshwari was stunned at this. "I don't think that will be possible tonight; my mother and I are going to the theatre."

"Can I call your mother on the phone and ask her?" he requested humbly.

Maheshwari agreed, sure that her mother would not be back home for at least another hour.

The professor went out to make the call. When he returned he looked very pleased.

"Very good, very good, very good!" Andiappan repeated the phrase like a village fortune teller as he took his seat again. "Your mother said she'll come immediately. I'm sending the car to fetch her. You can always see the play another time."

Maheshwari was taken aback. Her line about going to the theatre had been a lie, and she knew her mother could not have been at home. She could see danger lights blinking before her eyes. She was in a threatening situation, and she would have to tackle it by herself.

She simply smiled and said, "Yes, that's nice. Your house is amazing, professor."

"Oh yes, I was lucky to get it. It belongs to a relative of yours, Pavanandhan—it has a long history. I've been renting it from him for some time. Would you like me to show you around?"

What does Pavanandhan have to do with this? I thought this was about my father! "Do you know Rajangam Pillai, the advocate, too?" asked Maheshwari.

The professor stroked his chin meditatively, and took his time to respond. "I can't say I know him very well. I have brought a few properties through him. So, you know him well, is it?"

"Not very well," she replied, distractedly. She had to find some reason to get to the garden outside. Then she could sneak out to the road, walk to West Mambalam and get home from there.

"So, do you want to have a look around the bungalow?"

"Not really. I would like to see the garden, though." Maheshwari rose from her seat. Her knees were shaking.

"Oh yes, the garden! But it will be wet, now."

"I need some fresh air," Maheshwari insisted.

"Of course. Just wait until I have some more tea," he said, pouring some into his cup. "Oh dear, you haven't drank yours yet. It must have gone cold. Would you like some fresh tea?"

"No thanks, I'm fine." *What an idiot I was to follow that woman, a total stranger! And no one knows I'm here...*

Her throat was dry; she picked up her tea cup and took a sip. It was oddly bitter, as if carelessly brewed. Disregarding the taste, she drank it all.

At the last sip, she felt a weird sharpness in her mouth. Perhaps the tea leaves had boiled too long.

Andiappan was draping an *angavasthram* over his shoulder. When he looked up, he saw Maheshwari stumble and catch the edge of the table for support. Her face was blanched and her eyes unfocused. She tried to say something, but could not. He approached her and she fell limp into his arms. Andiappan carried her to the nearest sofa and laid her down. He tucked a small bolster under her head, left the room, locked the door and headed to the stairway.

The Professor's Scheme; The Monster's Blood

Pichaikannu stood smoking on the landing. The professor put aside his annoyance and asked, "Where is Ammani?"

"Upstairs."

"Go tell her I want to see her."

"Go tell her yourself," Pichaikannu retorted.

The professor's face went red with anger. Pichaikannu had always been arrogant, but he had never been openly disrespectful until now. Andiappan could barely control his rage. "I need a few envelopes," he hissed. "The local post office will have closed already; go get me some from the one on Mount Road."

"Later," Pichaikannu said dismissively. "Where is that girl?"

"Girl? What girl?" asked Andiappan, feigning ignorance.

"The girl you invited for tea. And don't try to tell me she left; I've been standing here watching that door, and I overheard your conversation."

Andiappan sighed with frustration. "She's resting, for she felt unwell. I gave her some medicine."

"Chee! Shut up!" Pichaikannu growled. "I've had about enough of you and your phony doctorate from some vague American university. Just tell me, when is the girl going home? I have the car ready."

"She's not going home tonight. She's staying here."

"That wasn't *her* plan. When I drove her here from the library, she asked me to drop her at a friend's place on the way back."

Andiappan knew he was bluffing. "She is not well," he repeated impatiently. "When I have guests, you are supposed to stay outside in the garden, at the doorstep. You're overstepping your bounds. I've put up with enough nonsense from you. You think just because I married your Athai, you call the shots around here? If you are under that impression, I am sorry to disappoint you. You're fired."

Pichaikannu nodded. "I'm free to go when I want; no one can stop me. But I don't want to leave this job until I figure out what dirty tricks you people are up to."

Andiappan lost his temper. "Rascal! Are you accusing your own Athai, then, as well? She was the one who brought the girl here."

"Oh, I have great respect for my Athai. I owe her a lot. Every iota of criminality in me, I learned from her. I'm sure she's the brains behind whatever easy-money plans you've made." He looked fiercely at Andiappan for a second and then turned his eyes down. "Yes, Andiappan; Ammani Athai treated me well. But did you know I used to have a twin? He disappeared when we were seven; Ammani Athai told me that he died. But recently I've been having dreams about him, where I can see him standing in front of my eyes.

"We used to play together near the graveyard mound. Back in those days..." he looked back up at Andiappan with piercing, furious eyes that made the professor shiver in his pants. "Yes, your wife Ammaniammal is an honourable woman alright—a heart of gold! Oh, the things we children had to suffer in her care—how she used to beat my brother, Pakirisami! But she did not kill him—and neither did anyone else. I know he's still alive, and that he will not die until he has taken his vengeance on you and my Athai, one way or the other. She should thank God that she was born as a woman; if she were a man, I would have strangled her long ago. Please tell her that. I'm going to bring the car to

the front of the house. When I drive up, you had better be there with the girl."

Without another word, he turned around and left. Andiappan raged up the stairs to the room where his wife was. They argued heatedly for some time. Finally, Ammaniammal came out of the room alone, and went down to the room where Maheshwari lay.

Maheshwari was just regaining consciousness. She sat with her head held in her palms, still very groggy. Without a word, Ammaniammal helped her to her feet and guided her up the stairway, and then up another flight of narrow steps to a room on the second floor, which was full of wooden crates and furniture. She shut her inside and went back down.

Maheshwari had no memory of this; she had walked the steps in a daze. When she became fully conscious, she found herself on a steel cot, her head pounding like it had been hit by a pestle. The room was dark except for a tiny dim lamp, and everything seemed to be spinning. When she finally steadied herself, she saw a glass of water and two pills on a table by the cot. She understood that the pills were meant to relieve the effect of the tranquilizer. She swallowed them and drank the water. It was half an hour before her head stopped throbbing.

The room had only one window, nailed shut with wire mesh. She tried to pry open the door again with her delicate hands—to no avail. She saw that this was not the original door for the room; there was a gap of almost two inches at the bottom. Then she pulled a chair to the window and checked it. It was impossible to break open the wire mesh.

She sat again on the bed and made an effort to set aside her fears and think rationally.

What an idiot she had been! Not even a little kid would have been so easily fooled. Her mother must be panicking at home.

The thought struck her that perhaps she was being kept captive for the strange key.

At that moment she heard a sound outside. The door opened, and Andiappan entered with a smile.

"Maheshwari," he said, sounding concerned, "are you all right? Does this happen to you often?"

"Does what happen often? I don't understand!"

"I was scared. Why did you pass out so suddenly? Does anyone else in your family have mental problems?"

For a second Maheshwari was too stunned to respond. *What nerve, to ask that question with a straight face!*

"I don't mean to imply you come from a family of lunatics," Andiappan continued apologetically. "But you screamed so loud! Do you remember? There, see, you don't! I didn't think you would. So sad!"

"Dr. Andiappan, I want to go home now."

He looked at her for a moment. "I know you do. But you have nothing to worry about here. Your mother has been informed; she must be on her way." He opened a leather bag he was carrying, removed a few sheets of paper from it, and took the pen from his pocket.

He turned to Maheshwari and spoke formally. "My friend, the situation here is very complicated. I am not used to speaking to women with nervous problems. My wife was terrified; she was worried you would go out and tell the world that I drugged you. And of course if you did, people would believe you; they don't know about your condition. I must say, my wife is very clever.

"So, she gave me an idea," Andiappan continued. "I want you to sign this paper. It's a statement from you that says I, Dr. Andiappan, invited you to my house and treated you with extreme affection and dignity, and the only reason I kept you locked in this room was because you went hysterical and fainted. Then there will be no problem for me."

"There's no way I'm going to sign a statement that says I'm mad."

"I don't expect you to. I have not written that you're *mad*, just that you had an episode. And I promise not to misuse this document for any other purpose. It is only to ensure that I don't get blamed." Saying this, he placed the papers on the table and handed her the pen.

"Can I read this through?" asked Maheshwari.

"Must you?" asked Andiappan, looking hurt. "The moment you sign, I shall take you to your mother."

"You just told me she was on her way."

"I thought we could meet her halfway," Andiappan said patiently.

Maheshwari scanned through the document, which was written on revenue stamp paper. She happened on a line which read:

Upon the death of Maheshwari, all assets, properties, deeds and assignations will be transferred to the name of Dr. Andiappan…

Promptly she put down the pen. "What does this document really say?" she demanded angrily.

"Sign," ordered Andiappan, all pretence of politeness falling out his voice.

"I will not sign any document that I haven't read."

"You *will* sign. Or else…" He dropped the threat and became patronizing again. "Why would you want to trouble yourself with all these legal semantics? Don't you…"

Maheshwari interrupted stubbornly, "I refuse to sign."

"You refuse, do you?" Andiappan ground his teeth, snatched up the papers, stuffed them into his bag and took an intimidating step towards her. She tried to jump past him out the door, but he caught her by the arms, threw her back on the bed and growled, "Maheshwari, you shall stay locked here until you change your mind. You shall have neither food nor water. I gave you a chance to save yourself, but you are too pig-headed." Abruptly he walked out of the room, slamming the door shut and locking it.

She was too scared to even think straight. She climbed back onto the chair, but realized that even if she could break through the mesh, the window was too high for her to jump. Then she took all the furniture and boxes in the room and jammed them against the door, so that it could not be opened from the outside. At the end of all this strenuous activity, she threw herself on the bed, overcome by hunger and exhaustion, and fell asleep.

She was startled awake some time later by an eerie sound from somewhere in the house. She could not imagine what was making it. There was total silence for a while, and then the howl began again, this time louder than before. She was shivering. It did not sound like a human voice at all, but something other-worldly. She put her ear to the wall and listened intently. About ten minutes later, she heard thudding footsteps

approaching the room. Someone was trying to force open the lock. She stood watching, unable to move. She could not imagine who it might be on the other side. Whoever it was, they clearly did not have the key.

Then, through the gap under the door, Maheshwari saw the toes. They were enormous, grotesque! Suddenly three huge fingers appeared under the door and attempted to rip it off its hinges. Even for this strange demon, the effort was too much; the fingers started bleeding. The hand began oozing blood!

Maheshwari screamed, ran terrified around the bed to the window, leapt on the chair, and looked out desperately. On the other side of the wire mesh was the blanched face of the driver, Pichaikannu!

20

In Ammaniammal's Hand

Prabakaran had not planned to visit Malaimel Vinayagar Library that day, but he felt he had to see Maheshwari at any cost. He walked straight up to the desk.

"Maheshwari left a while ago, with a woman," a clerk told him.

"Was her mother here?"

"No, it wasn't her; we know her mother. The woman who came today seemed rich; she was dressed ostentatiously. She came in her car and took Maheshwari away with her. We've never seen her before."

Prabakaran was disappointed; he'd hoped to take her out for a play that evening. He waited until about seven in the evening for her to return, but she did not. He went to her house on Spur Tank Road, where her mother told him that she had not called.

"Maybe she's gone for dinner or the theatre—she goes with a friend sometimes. Why don't you wait for a while? I'm sure she'll be back soon."

Prabakaran accepted. But, at eleven that night, there was still no sign of her. He had not yet told Maheshwari's mother what he had learned from the library clerk.

"Is this friend of Maheshwari's very rich?" he asked, finally.

"No, I think she works in a pharmacy. Why do you ask?"

"I was told someone picked her up from the library in a car."

"Then we don't have to worry," laughed the mother. "Her friend has some relatives who have cars. Maybe she picked Maheshwari up in one of those."

Prabakaran took his leave, stepped outside and lit a cigarette, and walked back to his house. At his place he carefully opened the front door, then latched it shut and inspected every room. All the entrances had been fitted with alarms which would go off if any strangers tried to break in. When he was sure that the house was undisturbed, he changed and got ready for bed.

He wasn't able to fall asleep as usual, for he was disturbed about Maheshwari. He tried reading for a while, and tossed around until about one before he dozed off. Then he was awakened by the telephone. He picked up the receiver.

"Hello, who is this?"

"Murder! They're going to kill me… They're in my house. Murder!"

Prabakaran felt his blood go cold. "Who's speaking?"

There was no reply.

"Who are you? Where are you calling from?"

There was a pause, followed by groans and loud wailing sobs, and the sound of the voice begging, "Please, stay away! Don't touch me! Please… someone help me! *Aiyyo*, help!"

Prabakaran heard a crash at the other end, and then nothing. Immediately he called the telephone exchange. He was told that the call had come from a Dr. Andiappan's residence in Kodambakkam. Then he realized the panicked voice had been the professor's. He called Inspector Duraisami, not expecting him to answer.

Surprisingly, the inspector took the call at the first ring. "Inspector Duraisami here!"

Prabakaran told him about the strange call from Andiappan's place.

"Sounds like there's something sinister going on. Come over here, we'll go in my car. Inspectors Devasahayam and Paramaguru are here with me."

This was more than Prabakaran had expected. "My car's faster. I'll pick you up."

"Fine, come quickly."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

He got dressed, made sure his revolver was loaded and opened the door to step out—and then stepped back in surprise, as if he'd been punched hard in his stomach. "You? She's not back yet?" he gasped.

It was Maheshwari's mother. She shook her head, almost in tears. "I'm sorry. I waited till twelve, then I went to Maheshwari's friend's house. She hadn't gone there after all. I don't know where she is."

"Are there any other friends she could be with?" asked Prabakaran, equally worried.

"There are two others, but I called them, and she wasn't there either. I even checked with her colleague at the library, who told me that she went off with a middle-aged woman wearing lots of jewellery, with a grating voice."

Prabakaran recognized the description of the voice from his first visit to Andiappan's house. It must have been Andiappan's wife. Blood rushed to his face.

Seeing this, the mother become even more alarmed. "Do you think she is in some sort of danger?" she asked, horrified.

"I hope not. Why don't you wait here? I have an idea where she is; I'll go and check."

"Can I come along with you, please?"

"No! I'll call you in half-an-hour. Why don't you read a book or a magazine till then?"

"No thank you. I have a rickshaw waiting. I'd better go home, in case she gets there late."

Once he saw her off, he started the car and raced to the inspector's house. Duraisami and the other officers were waiting.

"Hurry, get in. I can hardly think straight right now; I need your help," said Prabakaran. The car rushed to Kodambakkam; on the way, he briefed the others on what had happened.

"Well, if it *was* Andiappan's wife, what do you think she wanted from Maheshwari?" wondered Duraisami.

Prabakaran didn't know.

"Isn't Ranjit Singh's house in this area too?" asked the inspector, as they passed Nungambakkam.

"Yes, to your left." They were speeding past the scientist's house, but the building could not be seen from the road; the compound was too choked with foliage.

"Pavanandhan's case is getting more and more mysterious by the day," Duraisami said. "It gets more complicated at every turn."

"Why do you think he is avoiding Chennai?" asked Prabakaran, breaking his silence.

"Have you met him?"

"No, I just saw a photograph. A newspaper photographer in Colombo happened to catch him in the background, while he stood on the balcony of his hotel room watching the reception for the Indian delegation to Ceylon. I had that picture blown up."

"Hmm, interesting. What does he look like?"

"Later," Prabakaran said, bringing the car to a halt in front of Dr. Andiappan's house. He pressed hard on the horn, but there were no lights switched on in the house; neither was there any movement. He chucked a stone at a window on the first floor. It was answered with a deadening silence.

The inspector broke open a window on the ground floor. Prabakaran climbed through first.

The hall was quiet. All he could hear was the ticking clock. But his intuition told him something was wrong. He switched on his torch and rushed to open the front door and let the others in.

"There's been a murder here," he said agitatedly. "I can smell blood."

He looked around for the main switch and turned it on. All the lights on both the floors came on.

"Look over there!" yelled Duraisami, clutching Prabakaran's arm.

On the upstairs landing, the light cast a huge shadow on the wall. There was someone leaning over the banister. With his revolver drawn, Prabakaran and the inspector rushed up the steps.

It was Ammaniammal, slumped over the banister, her eyes fixed on a point in the distance. Her right fist was clenched tight around something.

"She's dead," announced Duraisami. They carried her carefully to the landing. There were no wounds apparent on the body. "She must have died of shock. Or from seeing something that terrified her," surmised Duraisami. "I've seen deaths like this before. Whatever she saw must have been horrific enough to give her a heart attack."

Prabakaran pried open her fingers. Something fell out on the floor with a clang. When he saw what it was, Prabakaran gasped aloud.

It was another one of the strange keys—the third key to the cryptic chamber!

He and Duraisami looked at each other, speechless.

"Where is the professor?" asked Duraisami. They tried to locate the telephone. Prabakaran remembered the instrument being downstairs. As they went down the steps, they saw something that stunned them.

The carpet on the stairway was covered with huge, bloody footprints.

Prabakaran touched the print; it was still wet. "Where did so much blood come from?" he asked, puzzled. They followed the footprints; on the ground floor, the prints were clearer.

"Whoever it was has taken the steps three at a time," Prabakaran said. They proceeded to check the hall. But there it seemed as if the person had darted all over, as if searching frantically for something.

A thousands questions flooded Prabakaran's brain. Had there been a second murder? What had happened to Maheshwari? Had she, too, been killed in an attempt to get her mysterious key? Or had she been done in because someone knew she was second in line for Pavanandhan's estate?

Prabakaran and Duraisami continued their search of the house, eventually coming to a halt in front of a locked room. They knocked

on the door, but could hear nothing from the other side; they checked the two rooms on the opposite side of the corridor, but found nothing useful there. They returned to the shut door. Prabakaran jimmied the lock; as they entered, he realized that this was the room in which he had met Andiappan for the first time. There was a red lamp on the edge of the desk. In its dim cone of light he saw the telephone, which had been knocked to the floor. Just as Prabakaran stepped over to pick it up—*gubuk!*—all the lights in the house went off.

"Did any of you touch the switch?" asked Duraisami, stumbling in the darkness.

"No sir," replied one of the other inspectors.

Prabakaran switched on his torch again and approached the desk. At the other end was a human form, lying on its face. Prabakaran's fears had come true.

Andiappan, the professor of literature, had been murdered. The telephone receiver was still clutched in his right hand. His throat had been ripped open with a crowbar. The weapon lay on the floor beside him, soaked in blood.

Every drawer in the desk had been carefully emptied. There was not a single paper or file in the room.

Duraisami donned his gloves, picked up the crowbar and placed it on the desk. Then he instructed one of the other officers to use the other telephone on the first floor to call police headquarters and ask for more assistance.

On the far side of this room was another door. It opened onto a small room with a window that hung wide open.

"It looks like the professor's wife brought Maheshwari here," said Prabakaran, his face ashen with fear. "We have to find her."

"The murderer must still be somewhere around here. The lights didn't go off on their own," the inspector said.

At that moment, the officer who had gone to call for reinforcements returned to say that the line had been cut while he was speaking. They checked the main connection box, but found nothing wrong there.

"You inspect the rooms down here. I'll check the first floor," said Prabakaran, racing up the steps. He carefully stepped over

Ammaniammal's body. What had happened to Maheshwari? There were no bloody footprints on the first floor; instead there was a trail of blood. On the whitewashed wall he saw a handprint, with a bit of bloodied surgical bandage stuck to it.

This hand must belong to the creature Prabakaran had shot at the Samaadhi Kaadu—the same thing that had attacked him in Hell's Haven. The bandage must have come loose while it handled the crowbar!

As he scanned the area he saw a narrow flight of stairs. He climbed up to find a room filled with junk whose door had been ripped off. The lock was in three pieces. The room was pitch dark.

Under the single steel cot was a women's handkerchief with the letter 'M' embroidered in one corner. Prabakaran picked it up with a trembling hand.

It was Maheshwari's!

Prabakaran's blood froze. "Inspector!" he shouted.

22

A Shower of Bullets in the Garden

Inspector Duraisami came running in at Prabakaran's cry. They began to look over the room together.

"There are blood stains on the wall, near the window, and at the bottom of the door. You can even make out the fingerprints. Do you see, Prabakaran?" asked Duraisami. "The person must have ripped the door off from beneath. Just look at the size of the fingers! I am sure this is your assailant."

Prabakaran nodded, looking more worried.

"I can't see any other signs of attack," said Duraisami, moving to the small window. Prabakaran was there ahead of him, standing on the chair looking out. There was a small ladder leading up to it. He jumped down from the chair and declared with joy, "Maheshwari was locked up here. But she got some help… she's escaped."

They climbed out of the window, down the ladder, and into the garden outside.

"What happened to the driver, Pichaikannu?" wondered the inspector. They had reached the back garden, which was very dark. They hesitated for a second before stepping into the gloom. "We've come this far. Let's walk ahead and see where this path leads," suggested the inspector. A few feet further on, he continued, "I think…"

Dumeel! Dumeel!

Two bullets came speeding out of the darkness, aimed at their heads. In a blink they threw themselves on the ground. They heard continuous shots ahead of them; then suddenly everything fell silent. They scanned the dark area, but could not make out anything. A few seconds later they heard a rustle behind a bush. Prabakaran aimed in the direction of the sound and shot twice. Again there was a long pause.

"How many people do you think are there? An army? How are they shooting so fast?" whispered Duraisami.

"I think it's just one person—with a revolver in each hand."

They crawled a few yards, scratching their knees in the process.

"I think we're safe now," said Prabakaran, rising to his feet. The next moment a bullet brushed past his ears.

23

A Clue in a Tin Box

Prabakaran tumbled over in shock. Then he heard someone running away, and rose to follow. But almost at once, he fell head over heels; their attacker had tied thin wires, crisscrossing amongst the trees, and invisible in the darkness. They had to proceed very carefully. The god of death was close at Prabakaran's heels that night.

"Are you sure Maheshwari has escaped?" asked Inspector Duraisami.

"Yes. There is a road behind the house; I saw it the last time I was here. If they made it that far, then they're out of danger."

They returned to Andiappan's house. The police backup had arrived and the lights had been turned back on. Prabakaran said a silent prayer for Maheshwari's safety, then turned his attention to the matters at hand. They sifted through everything in the house. In Ammaniammal's room they found a tin box full of letters and old documents. Prabakaran handed the inspector one bundle and looked through another one. Some of the letters were written in a childish scrawl and signed *Your loving nephew, Pakirisami.*

"I knew Pichaikannu was Ammaniammal's nephew. I didn't know she had any others," Prabakaran mused aloud.

"How could you guess how many nephews she has?" laughed Duraisami.

"But this letter here mentions Pichaikannu. So this Pakirisami must be a relative of his, maybe even a brother."

"What happened to Pichaikannu, by the way? I haven't seen him. Do you think he has some connection to these murders?" asked the inspector.

"You can drop that idea. I know Pichaikannu well. He's a crook, yes, but he's definitely not a murderer."

At that moment, Prabakaran's attention fixed on one of the letters. It read:

Dear Ammani,

I have just met Ranjit Singh and I heard that Ramanandhan is very sick. Can you get me the details? I don't need to tell you why.

Love, Andiappan

"So they're all well acquainted, eh? What is it that links Andiappan, Ranjit Singh and Ammaniammal to Ramanandhan? Why did Andiappan swear that he never met Ramanandhan's son? And now we can't even interrogate him," said Prabakaran. "What do we do next?"

"I have no idea," replied the bemused inspector.

Prabakaran took out the key from his pocket, "This is the third key to the cemetery. We need four more keys. Then we can crack open that

mysterious crypt. Once we accomplish that, we'll know who will hang to death for tonight's murders. There's another one of Pavanandhan's bungalows—the big one, Ramanandhan Bhavanam—in the plot adjacent to the Samaadhi Kaadu. I propose we go there now."

They went to the portico and got into Prabakaran's car. But when he started the engine, the car lurched forward and stopped. They got out and checked the tyres with their torchlights. All four had been slashed with a sharp knife.

24

Pichaikannu's Past; A Petrified Beauty

And what had become of Maheshwari? Hours before the police entered Andiappan's bungalow, as the monster struggled to break open the door of her room, she looked out the window to see the terrified face of Pichaikannu. She would never forget that horrific moment in her life. Was the driver an enemy too?

Pichaikannu, standing on the ladder, concentrated on breaking the window open. He extended his hand and Maheshwari took it without hesitation. She climbed out of the window and down the ladder as the monster succeeded in tearing the door off its hinges and burst into the room.

Holding her tightly, Pichaikannu pulled her through the garden, trying to stay hidden behind the plants, and then hurried out into a paddy field, fearing that the monster was following them. They ran about a mile until they reached the main road leading to Nungambakkam. Opposite them was an old wall.

"Up ahead is one of Pavanandhan's bungalows—part of Ramanandhan's estate. On the other side of this wall is the Samaadhi Kaadu," Pichaikannu said. Maheshwari felt a shiver. She had never dreamt that she would return to this horrendous place.

"A little further on, there's a gap in the wall, which is where I'm taking you. Otherwise, if the monster catches up, we have no escape," Pichaikannu went on.

"What *was* that thing?" Maheshwari finally found her voice. "I heard screams in Andiappan's house. What happened?"

"I heard them too; I thought you were the one who screamed. That's why I got you out of there."

They walked along the wall, and Pichaikannu continued. "The monster—I don't know who he is; but I do know he's human. He only looks like a monster. I saw him once, from a distance. I shall never forget the terror I felt then. But I also thought… there was something familiar." He paused. "But there's no point in me telling you all this; it won't entertain you. Here's the gap I told you about. Get in."

She could see nothing. The gap would not have been visible even in broad daylight, for it was choked with spiky Malabar nut shrubs.

In a few seconds they were inside the compound. Pichaikannu kept up a constant chatter to calm her nerves. Maheshwari was surprised to learn that Ammaniammal was his aunt.

"We were her wards, my brother Pakirisami and I. When I was seven, they told me that he died."

"Have you lived all your life with that woman?" asked Maheshwari.

"With *her?* No way! I ran away every chance I got," replied Pichaikannu, with an ironic laugh.

"But she's your athai… Didn't she care for you?"

"I don't think she knows what 'care' means. She hated my brother even more than me."

"Then why did you go back to work for her?"

Pichaikannu did not answer immediately. "She was lucky; she married Andiappan and her social status went up. But my own life was a mess. I've been to prison sixteen times already."

Maheshwari hesitated slightly. "Was it for stealing?" she asked.

Pichaikannu was unembarrassed. "I was born a car thief. I mean it. I love motor cars. I have stolen more cars than even a maharaja can own. The last time I was brought to court, the judge warned me that I would be listed as an incurable thief. If that happened then the police would have treated me like a dog. I put an end to my stealing and came to work for my athai. I don't know why she employed me. Perhaps she thought

because I was her blood relative I would obey her every command. I did some strange jobs for her." He suddenly stopped speaking, and signaled Maheshwari to stay quiet.

In a hushed whisper, he said, "Run! Run to your left and hide amongst the trees."

"Why? What did you see?" Maheshwari asked, trembling in fright.

"I'm not sure. Just do as I say, and don't make noise."

Maheshwari did not want to go off on her own. But he sounded so alarmed that she could not refuse. She walked towards the trees.

Pichaikannu threw himself on the ground and watched the monster approaching. It walked first to one side, then to the other, but was steadily moving closer. Pichaikannu was a brave person by nature; he did not scare as easily. His instincts took over; he was ready to face this monster. He pulled out a heavy spanner from his pocket, and just as the monster was upon him, he jumped at it.

Maheshwari could hear the monster scream as it fought to throw Pichaikannu off. The poor woman shut her eyes and ran blindly, crashing into trees, tearing her feet on the thorns. Finally, exhausted, she came to a stop. The clouds that had covered the moon slowly drifted away, and she could faintly make out her surroundings in the moonlight. When she realized where she was, her blood froze. She was standing on top of the Devanandhan mound. She nearly blacked out; heart pulsating fast, teeth chattering, and lips trembling, she slowly progressed towards the iron gate. The key was in there in the lock. Surprised, she peeked in through the gate. She could see nothing in the darkness, but she could hear the monster's scream from somewhere behind her. Was it after her? In a flash, she opened the gate, ran inside, shut and locked it, and removed the key.

Everything was silent. She reached the second gate and sagged against it, weary and scared. A huge shadow appeared at the outer gate. As she felt around frantically for the lock on the second gate, desperate to get away from the monster, a hand grabbed hers and dragged her into the hall of tombs.

25

In the Crypt

"Quiet! I will not harm you. What are you doing here?" asked an unfamiliar voice. It was a human voice, though—a welcome change from the monster's guttural howls.

"Move over so I can fix the light and open the gate," said the voice.

In the dim light that the hurricane lamp cast, Dr. Ranjit Singh looked even more horrible than usual. She stared at the long, thin, wrinkled face, soiled clothes, and thick beard.

There was a leather tool bag open on the ground in front of the tomb of the seven locks. There was a spanner in the second keyhole, and a saw lying on the ground.

"What brought you here, girl?"

She couldn't look away; his eyes seemed to hold her in a sort of trance. "A…a terrible monster man!"

He calmly lit a cigar. "At three o'clock in the morning?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "Women who go around walking the streets in the middle of the night usually don't get scared of strange men; they ask them if they're ready for some fun. Sit down, girl. On the floor, please. You're much taller than me; I hate talking to women taller than me. It makes me feel oppressed." He walked over to his tools, removed the spanner from the second lock, and packed them all back into his bag.

"I have an idea that you've come here to spy on me," he continued. "I heard you open the gate outside and come cautiously down the steps. For your information, I'm an archeologist—though I doubt you, or the person who sent you here, will believe me. Now what is your name?"

She licked her lips nervously and whispered, "Maheshwari."

"So *you're* Maheshwari! What a strange way to finally meet you," he said, and then looked at the tomb of seven locks for a while in silence. He shook his head slightly. "It's too late to change you. And that other woman—she's also too old to be changed. Yes, far too old." He turned back to her with a sad look, and continued. "If you were just six or seven, it would have been a simple task. But now you are… how old are you?"

"Twenty-two," she replied mechanically.

"Then I can do nothing. But anyway, you are a woman, and women are unfit for my research. Useless creatures; sometimes they even died on me—they have not evolved as much as males! I wasted years of research on them."

Maheshwari was shivering with fear.

He chewed his lips as he walked around to each tombstone, trying to jimmy the doors. "You said there was someone outside? He looked superhuman?"

Maheshwari nodded silently.

"The monster looks ugly, of course," remarked the scientist, quite pleased. "It's impossible to train creatures like that to be clean and civilized. Only intelligent beings can manage that. A heavy steam engine can a pull a line of coaches behind it; that doesn't mean you can expect it to be able to thread a needle."

He searched his pockets for something. Finally he pulled out a tiny bottle from his pants, with two red pills in it. "Here! Swallow these."

Maheshwari took the bottle, spellbound. "How unfortunate," said the scientist, almost to himself, trying a key in the second tombstone. "If only I could open all these doors! I could have beaten my adversaries long ago."

Maheshwari stared at him, unblinking.

"Did you take the pills?" he asked sternly. She stood there like a statue. "Go on, hurry. Please don't waste my time."

Even as her hands moved involuntarily, opening the bottle and emptying the pills into her palm, a part of her brain wondered why she was obeying the orders of a complete stranger. She popped the pills, but tucked them under her tongue, pretending to swallow. Satisfied, the scientist turned his attention to the third tombstone. As he looked away, she quickly spat out the pills into the darkness.

"Do you feel anything, girl?"

Maheshwari stumbled, feigning drowsiness.

"You, the next in line to Pavanandhan's estate… It's a pity that you have to die so young, girl." Ranjit Singh was eyeing her now with lust. "How sad it would be to die with your virginity intact."

Maheshwari's face lost all its colour. She didn't know how she was going to save her honour from this beast. She staggered backward and fell.

"Why do you hate me, girl? Is it my unkempt beard which puts you off? Don't worry about that; I can take it off or stick it on anytime I want." He ripped the fake beard away. "Look at me now."

Maheshwari could stand his lecherousness no longer. She collapsed, truly unconscious.

"Women are a real pain in the neck," Ranjit Singh said disgustedly, and returned to the tombs.

Maheshwari was not out for long. She could hear one of the tombs being opened. The scientist walked over, picked up the hurricane lamp next to her, and checked her from the corner of his eye before he walked back.

When he was at the other end of the hall, Maheshwari scrambled up, rushed through the inner gate and locked it tight behind her. Now she was safe from the scientist; but the monster still waited for her outside. She slowly walked up the steps, opened the outer gate, and stepped outside.

A thought flashed for a second—where was Pichaikannu?

She stumbled through the darkness, not sure which way she was going. She remembered that the last time she was here, Prabakaran had led her quickly from this spot to the watchman's hut. As she walked, she wished that Prabakaran was there with her now.

It was still dark, but she could see light on the horizon. If only the day would break sooner! Her fear was nearly driving her mad.

Behind her, she heard the barking of a dog, and the sound of a chain. But she tried to keep her cool. When the dog approached, snarling viciously, she did not run; instead, she gently patted its head. She had never been scared of dogs. The dog immediately wagged its tail, went quiet, and followed her as she walked ahead. She loosened its chain choker, and the grateful dog licked her hand loyally.

The path she took now went straight to the abandoned mansion next to the Samaadhi Kaadu. She stood outside the front door, with the dog besides her.

The once-majestic house looked dark and decrepit, its antique doors and windows shuttered. The dog gave a low growl. Maheshwari looked around fearfully, but could make out nothing. Perhaps there was something behind the bushes? But no—the dog was focused on the dark building.

Now she noticed a faint gleam from a crack in one of the window shutters. She went up to the window and saw a candle lit in a remote corner of an empty room. She sensed movement, and watched closely through the crack. Then she recognized the shape, and almost screamed aloud.

It was humongous, its body covered with a thick mat of long dark hair, wearing only a pair of tattered shorts made of a coarse material. Its muscles were taut and bulging. She continued staring at the creature; somehow, this time, she did not find it—*him*—so repulsive.

Not realizing that he was being observed, he walked up to the candle and snuffed it out. She caught a brief glimpse of his eyes, and the vacuity she saw there shook her. She held tightly to the dog to keep it quiet.

Suddenly the dog wrenched itself from her grasp and ran towards the road. She could hear a rustle of footsteps. Gathering what remained of her courage, she called out, "Don't come any closer, or I'll shoot!"

"Oh, thank god! Thank god you're alive!"

She recognized the voice and ran towards it. Dissolving into his arms, she cried, "Oh Prabakaran, you came!"

26

A Day in the Monster House

Even in normal circumstances, it can be embarrassing to be present when two lovers meet after a long separation. In this case, it was worse, for the woman meeting her lover had just escaped from the jaws of death!

Inspector Duraisami stood by uncomfortably. Clearing his throat gently, he said, "Prabakaran, shall we go ahead and finish what we came for?" Then he walked ahead towards the mansion.

Maheshwari slipped out of Prabakaran's arms and ran to the inspector, "Please wait. There is someone inside—a monster man!"

"It must be a cat burglar," remarked the inspector casually. "Are any of the windows open?"

"No!"

"Maybe the watchman has a guest staying here," said Prabakaran as he knocked hard on the front door.

After a brief second a voice came from the other side of the door. "Who's that?"

"It's me, Prabakaran, with Inspector Duraisami. Open the door!"

The door opened and the watchman stood there, half-asleep. "Please come in. Anything important?"

"Is there anyone else here in the house with you?"

"No one except my wife!"

They entered, switched on all the lights, and went to the room where Maheshwari had seen the monster. They had to break open a lock to enter. Once inside, Prabakaran checked every nook and corner, but could find nothing. *Maybe it was Maheshwari's imagination*, Prabakaran thought to himself—until he noticed a thick walking stick in one corner of the room.

"Does this belong to you?" he asked the watchman.

"No sir," replied the watchman, puzzled. "It wasn't there when I locked up last night. I sweep all the rooms every day; I swept here last night too."

"What, are there many different entrances to this house?" Prabakaran meant this as a joke, but the watchman's answer threw him.

"Yes sir, there are. There's an entrance in each wing, and a loading entrance to the basement. I've heard there are secret passages beneath the house, as well. But I've never been in them."

Prabakaran walked around the room, knocking on the walls. But everything seemed solid. Then he took a closer look at the walking stick. There was a clump of wet soil stuck to its end.

"What are you thinking?" asked the inspector.

"Nothing clear!"

Whenever he happened to look at Maheshwari, he felt sorry for her. Even though there was no breeze at all, she was shivering. Prabakaran was anxious to find out what had happened to her.

The inspector asked the watchman to prepare some coffee. The warm drink soothed her a bit, and she began relating what her experiences of earlier that night. Neither of the men thought of interrupting her with a question. She had to get it out of her system.

Finally she said, "I still have no idea why Dr. Andiappan locked me up. What's happened to him?"

Prabakaran did not reply at once.

"I know I heard a horrible scream. Was that the professor's dying cry?" she asked, still white in the face.

"Perhaps," said Prabakaran, not wanting to scare her further. "You said you were followed to the Samaadhi Kaadu, and that Pichaikannu is still out there somewhere. Did you hear any physical struggle after you left him?"

She nodded, and opened the windows wide. The day had dawned. It was much easier to search the mansion in the daylight. Prabakaran heard a car drive up. "Did you call for reinforcements?" he asked the inspector, puzzled.

"No," the inspector said, walking out to the portico. Prabakaran shut the door and followed him.

The car stopped and Rajangam Pillai got out. "Was there some unpleasantness?" he asked. "Where is Maheshwari? Is she here?"

"Yes! But how do you know that?" asked Prabakaran.

"Is she all right?"

"Yes, she is. Come in; what brings you here now?"

The advocate took a letter from his shirt pocket. It was written on the letterhead of a star hotel in Chennai. The handwriting was familiar to Prabakaran. It read:

Dear Rajangam Pillai,

I cannot provide you all the details in this letter. Please go to the house on my estate near the tombs. I think my cousin Maheshwari is in danger there. In fact her whole family is in peril. Perhaps you are, too. When you get to my house, tell Maheshwari to stay there until tomorrow. I will be there at four in the morning. Make sure that she does not step out.

Pavanandhan

"How did you get this letter?" Prabakaran asked, bemused.

"There was a loud knock on my door around one last night," replied the advocate. "I opened it. There was no one, just this letter lying there. I didn't even read it at first; I thought it was a prank. But when I returned to my bed, the telephone rang. It was Pavanandhan on the line. He wanted to know if I'd read the letter and told me to come here at once. But before I could ask for an explanation, he cut the call. So I went to Maheshwari's house, and her mother told me she had gone missing."

"Did you call the police?"

"No... I guess I should have. But her mother told me you had already come looking for her. So it seemed unnecessary for me to go to the police. Where is she?"

Prabakaran opened the door and Maheshwari came out, relieved to see another familiar face. Leaving her with the advocate, Prabakaran headed to the graveyard mound. It was locked. He knew it would be useless to go down to the hall to the tombs; of course Ranjit Singh would have gotten away by now. Prabakaran checked the path Maheshwari had taken for any signs of the monster, or of Pichaikannu, who had stayed back to defend her. But he could see no signs of violence. The place was choked with weeds and shrubs. It would be impossible to inspect the whole area on his own. So he returned to the mansion.

When he entered, he found the advocate and the inspector in a hushed conversation.

"Prabakaran," said the inspector, "do you think the monster could still be somewhere in this house?"

"Does the house have a basement or a dungeon of some sort?"

"Not that I know of," replied the advocate. "That's just a story they tell around the servants' quarters. I even asked the engineer who built this mansion. I'm sure there is no secret passage here."

Prabakaran did not respond. After a few moments, the advocate asked, "So, what's your next step?"

"I think I'll head home," said Prabakaran. "First I'll drop Maheshwari off at her mother's."

"I think she might want to stay here," said the worried advocate. "Pavanandhan's letter says it is safer for her here, too."

"You want her to stay locked in this house for the next twenty-four hours?" Prabakaran asked incredulously.

"Yes. I think this is a warning worth paying heed to," said Rajangam, becoming more convinced. "There's some unknown danger out there. Pavanandhan wants Maheshwari to be here when he comes at four in the morning. Hopefully then this mystery will be finally solved."

Prabakaran stared at him. "You're sure about this?"

The advocate nodded. "Yes, I am! The inspector agrees with me. You would too, if you knew this family's past. Each of the five feudal lords before Ramanandhan was brutally murdered. And every murder was preceded by strange events, like we've witnessed here. This could even be the reason Pavanandhan is so hesitant to return to Chennai."

"But we're not feudal lords," Prabakaran said with a smile.

"At this point, we're all connected with this family."

Prabakaran's expression was unreadable. "Forget the rest of us, Mr. Pillai. Maheshwari is second in line to Pavanandhan's fortune. There's no way I'm going to allow her to spend a night here."

"I understand. But what if we call her mother over too? There are plenty of bedrooms. Everyone will be comfortable. Let's get a couple of servants to stay over as well. Twenty-four hours isn't all that long."

Prabakaran looked to the inspector for help. He seemed to be agreeing with the suggestion.

"I'll stay along with you," offered the inspector. "In fact, let's all stay here with Maheshwari. I need to get to the bottom of this. Let's hope Pavanandhan gets here as promised."

Prabakaran was surprised that even Maheshwari seemed amenable this plan. She didn't have the energy to venture out anywhere; she felt too exhausted even to take a step. The inspector motioned Prabakaran aside.

"Say yes, Prabakaran. I could do with some rest myself."

Prabakaran continued to protest for a while, but in the end, they convinced him. Duraisami sent an officer to Hell's Haven to try to nab Ranjit Singh. The advocate was told to go and fetch Maheshwari's mother in his car. Prabakaran called to inform her that her daughter was safe; she was desperate to see her, and wanted to come immediately. Prabakaran had to plead with her to get her to wait for the advocate.

27

Waiting for Pavanandhan

The officer returned from Hell's Haven, looking dejected. "Ranjit Singh has disappeared."

"We can't let him get away. He has one of the keys with him," Prabakaran said.

"What key are you talking about?"

"He has the fourth key to that tomb. The fifth must be with Pavanandhan; but I have no idea where the other two keys are."

The inspector was silent for a few minutes. "Where do you think Pichaikannu is?"

"God knows. But I'm thankful that he helped Maheshwari escape."

"Have you asked for more police?" asked Rajangam Pillai.

"There will be twelve officers, fully armed, guarding the compound tonight," the inspector answered. "But they don't know what

Pavanandhan looks like. Will you describe him to them, so they don't accidentally shoot him down when he shows up at four?"

"If he shows up at all," said the advocate. He started to pace the room, restlessly. "Pavanandhan is not in Chennai. At least, he's not in that hotel his letter came from. I stopped there this morning on the way to pick up Maheshwari's mother. They told me he never checked in."

"Then where did he call from last night?"

"Maybe from a telephone booth, in the train station or some street corner. Who knows?"

That evening they got a report that Ranjit Singh had been spotted driving his car like a lunatic near Villivakkam, swearing loudly to himself.

Prabakaran checked every bedroom that they were going to use that night. The largest one in the right wing had been allotted to Maheshwari and her mother. Rajangam Pillai would stay in the opposite room. He removed the excess furniture from both bedrooms, inspected the window bars, and checked the walls for secret entrances. It was a long time before he returned satisfied.

The inspector met him at the landing. "I'll post an officer in the corridor. I don't think we will have more trouble tonight. Though I suppose Pavanandhan will bring us some fresh problems in the morning. Let's wait until then."

✕ 28 ✕

Courageous Duraisami; Anxious Lovers

Prabakaran had one more place to check: the basement. There was an entrance from the kitchen. He took along a hurricane lamp, since there was no electricity down below. One of the basement rooms was full of old furniture; another stored guns and cases of ammunition. The other rooms were empty, except for the large central room, in which there were three huge barrels. The watchman told him that they had been delivered a few days before. Prabakaran checked them and found that

they were full of petrol. He grinned. He felt fully charged, ready to face any challenge. Then he walked out of the basement through the loading entrance, went around the house—fighting through thick bushes—and came in again through the eastern entrance.

There, he met Maheshwari.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"Oh yes, very well," she said. "I am sorry to have troubled you so much."

"Lots of people put me through trouble, Maheshwari. But it's always just been part of the job. With you, it's different."

Maheshwari gave him a close look. "So am I safe now?"

Prabakaran did not reply.

"Rajangam Pillai is worried," she said. "He thinks he's the next target."

"Who is he scared of?" asked Prabakaran.

"Ranjit Singh," Maheshwari replied with a shiver.

"How do you know that? Did he say something to you?"

Maheshwari nodded. "Men usually reveal their secrets to women more easily than to other men. He thinks the scientist has some menacing hold over Pavanandhan. Why do think he insisted we spend the night here?"

"I only know about a letter he got."

"He thinks this house is as safe as a fortress, and his enemies won't be able to get him. I don't know why he insisted that I stay too, though."

"Maheshwari, besides Pavanandhan, you are the last remaining heir. That's why you're surrounded by so many threats."

A servant came in to announce dinner. After eating, Prabakaran and Maheshwari went for a stroll in the garden. Her mother sat on a marble seat, watching them to make sure they came back safely. When they did, Maheshwari went up to her mother, whispered something in her ear, and took her to where Prabakaran was waiting.

Duraisami and the advocate were sitting on the portico, trading stories about their cases. After a while, Prabakaran joined them. The sky was overcast; it looked as if it was going to pour.

"Let's go for a walk," suggested Prabakaran. "We won't go as far as the graveyard mound."

Rajangam Pillai didn't look pleased with the idea. "It's dark," he said. "And should we really leave the two women alone?"

"There are officers here to take care of them. The women are tired; they've gone up to their room," replied Prabakaran.

The three stepped out into the grounds. It wasn't completely dark yet; there was enough light to see what was ahead of them. As they walked, Prabakaran told the advocate about Vedanayagam's murder.

"How strange! I didn't even read about this in the daily papers," said the advocate, stunned. "I have no doubt, the tomb he spoke of must be the one in Devanandhan's Mound."

"We'll soon find the key to the mystery," remarked the inspector confidently.

"I wish I had known about this earlier," sighed Rajangam Pillai. "I could have been of help to you. Did Vedanayagam tell you who employed him?"

Prabakaran shook his head. "He didn't, but we can guess."

"Ranjit Singh?"

"Must be. I can't think of anyone else."

They had reached the spot where Pichaikannu had encountered the monster. "So, you guys don't want to go the graveyard mound, right?" he asked with a grin.

The advocate replied at once, totally shaken. "I'm sure I don't. I'm not ready to venture to that cursed, haunted place at night. Let's go back."

They began walking back to the mansion.

"Let's wait for Pavanandhan to clear everything up for us in the morning," said Prabakaran. Suddenly he looked at his watch and announced, "It's late. I want to go to bed."

The inspector chose a comfortable easy chair and relaxed. "I think I'll stay in this chair tonight."

29

A Children's Song

Around eleven, when he was sure that everyone had gone to sleep, Prabakaran slowly slipped out of his room, locked his door, and walked silently to the inspector, who had been waiting for him. Quietly, they went together to the room where Maheshwari had seen the monster.

The room was dark, all windows shut. Prabakaran open one of the windows without bars, leaving it unlatched.

"Inspector, you wait in the hall outside. Don't make a sound until you hear me yell. We may have to wait until dawn. Perhaps Ranjit Singh will pay us a visit then." The inspector left the room. Prabakaran climbed to the top of a tall bureau and sat to wait the night out.

Time passed very slowly. Prabakaran did not stir from his perch. He heard a clock in another room strike twelve. Just as Prabakaran worried that he might be waiting in vain, the floor in the eastern corner of the room cracked open, and ray of light was visible. Gradually the ray became wider. A head came into view from below the floor. A candlelight was flickering just beneath it.

The face looked terrifying in the weird shadow, with a blank expression and wide jaws. The thing had thick, strong hands. It leapt up into the room, and placed the candle on the floor in front of it. In the dim glow of the candle, the figure was other-worldly, naked but for a pair of shorts, and a black cord around its neck with a strange pendant. After a moment, a second figure jumped up from the hole in the floor, even taller and stronger than the first. Prabakaran sat watching them from above, breathless, his heart beating a drum roll. The first figure cupped the candle with a giant palm, walked to the wall and felt around. And then—Prabakaran almost gasped, and had to clamp his mouth shut with his hands—it spun a picture hanging on the wall around and revealed a cupboard behind it. The first figure opened it, felt inside, took something out and showed to the second figure. They brought their heads together and studied the object.

There was a faint knock on the door. The two figures quickly snuffed out the candle and ran back to the secret passage. In a flash they had disappeared and shut the trap door.

Unable to control his irritation, Prabakaran jumped down from the bureau and yanked the door open. It was Inspector Duraisami.

"I heard some movement. Are you alright?" the inspector asked, worried.

"If only you had waited for a few minutes!" sighed Prabakaran, impatiently, switching on the lights.

The room was empty.

"Look at that," the inspector, cried excitedly, pointing to the secret shelf that the figures had opened, but had no time to shut.

"I know!" grunted Prabakaran. They went closer to examine it. It looked like any other ordinary wooden shelf, full of children's toys—a limbless horse, a set of electric train cars missing an engine.

Next Prabakaran tried, with the inspector's help, to pry open the trap door. But it was locked from below.

"Wait!" ordered Prabakaran, and raced out to the garden. But there was no one there. He ran towards the graveyard mound, as fast as he could.

As he got closer, he began walking silently, cautiously. Through the darkness, he could hear voices, singing. It was a children's song—one that he had learned over twenty years ago.

"Kai veesamma, kai veesu,
Kadaikku pogalaam, kai veesu,
Mitaai vangalaam, kai veesu
Medhuvai thingalaam, kai veesu!

Swing your arms child, swing away,
Let's go to the shop, swing away,
Let's buy candies, swing away,
Let's chew them slowly, swing away!"

Prabakaran couldn't believe what he was hearing. Who could be singing this on the mound?

Now he was crawling over the rough ground, using the foliage for cover. He took out his kerchief and swabbed his face; he was trembling and sweating with anxiety. Then he recognized a tall tree which grew near the mound. As he approached, he saw that the first gate was wide open. In front of it were three figures holding hands and skipping around in circle, cheerfully singing the song.

For a moment, Prabakaran thought his heart would stop. It was like watching a nightmare come true. It was scary and pitiful at the same time. Two of figures were the monsters he had just seen in the dark room. It took him a moment to recognize the third—then, with a start, he realized it was Pichaikannu!

Abruptly, the song stopped and three flopped on the ground. Then one of the monsters held up an object, looked it over, and excitedly passed it to the other. Prabakaran saw that it was a toy train engine. The two creatures seemed to derive immense joy from playing with it. They passed it back and forth, admiring it, chattering gleefully in childish, guttural gibberish. Pichaikannu rose and stared into the distance.

All of a sudden, from out of nowhere, there was a shrill whistle. The two monsters jumped to their feet, shivering with fear. Pichaikannu quickly disappeared. Another piercing whistle soon followed, and the weird form of Dr. Ranjit Singh emerged from the bushes. He held a long whip and was slowly approaching the monsters, talking softly.

"Ah... my dear babies! Here you are. Come on, let's go!" he ordered them, cracking the whip. The monsters meekly crouched to the ground. The scientist continued to give instructions in Punjabi—Prabakaran couldn't understand him. He could only watch the monsters obediently lope off into the dense jungle behind the scientist. Prabakaran didn't dare to move as yet. Where had Pichaikannu gone?

Then, in the dim light, he saw Pichaikannu come out of the bush and follow the scientist. A second later, Prabakaran followed his trail. It was too dark for him to make sense of where he was, but he wasn't going to lose them now.

There was a mud road ahead with a street light. He let Ranjit Singh and the creatures walk ahead, and hid beneath a tree, waiting for them to pass under the light. Then he heard a car engine start. He stepped in the direction of the sound, when he saw a figure run into the lane from the bushes and throw himself onto the back of the car. The man clung to the car as it began to move.

The car was in bad condition, and the mud road was overgrown with creepers, so it could not drive very fast. Prabakaran ran behind it as it chugged along the path. Then he saw the figure climb into the car through the back window. The next second the scream of the startled scientist ripped through the air. The car careened out of control, veered off the road and drove straight into a small lake.

Prabakaran stood shocked out of his wits, not knowing what to do next. Then he ran over to lake.

⚡30⚡

Pichaikannu's Tears; The Advocate Collapses

Prabakaran stood at the edge of the lake and watched as a human figure emerged from it and plodded up to him, ranting incomprehensibly. The man keeled over, and Prabakaran caught him. It was Pichaikannu!

"What happened?" asked Prabakaran.

"Oh god! The car sank. Do something, Prabakaran. Maybe you can save them. No, not that evil fiend—the other two. Can you try and get them out?"

Prabakaran stripped off his shirt and dived into the cold water. Pichaikannu followed him. But the car was stuck fast in the sludge, and the doors would not open; the two creatures were too enormous to be pulled through the windows. Finally, they dragged Ranjit Singh out and up to the bank. Squatting next to him, Pichaikannu was weeping.

"Please, arrest me now. I think I killed him; I hit him with my spanner hard enough to break his skull. I won't be sorry if he dies."

"Did you kill Andiappan, too?" Prabakaran asked.

"No... that was my brother, Pakirisami. And I'm not sorry for that either... even though he was acting on Ranjit Singh's orders when he did it. Ammaniammal died of sheer fright, just at the sight of him."

"That monster was your brother?" Prabakaran asked, not able to believe what he was hearing.

"Yes—my twin brother. He was the bigger of the two monsters—Ranjit Singh's first lab rat. He and that other one... Poor souls, why did they have to die?"

Prabakaran tried his best to comfort Pichaikannu. They left Ranjit Singh lying unconscious by the lake and walked back to the house.

As they approached, they heard frantic police whistles. Prabakaran ran ahead, and saw flames rising from the mansion's windows.

Rajangam Pillai was running around the building in a panic. He shouted to the inspector, "Run, wake up the two women. Hurry! Can't you break open the door?"

Duraisami casually lit a cigar, took a puff, and blew a smoke ring.

"Don't you hear me, Inspector? Go and save the women!"

"Oh, the women... I suppose we must let them die!" shrugged the inspector.

"What? What did you say?"

"The whole building is on fire. By now they'll just be a handful of ashes. If you care so much, then go in yourself."

"Prabakaran, what are you waiting for? Is your life more precious to you than Maheshwari's?" the advocate demanded, agitated.

Prabakaran held his arm. "Don't worry Mr. Pillai. Maheshwari and her mother are not in there."

The advocate gave him a disbelieving glare. "They're not?"

"No. When we were out walking, the inspector had them removed to safety."

The advocate was immobile with shock.

"We found the barrels of petrol in the basement," Prabakaran continued. "We were ready for an 'accidental' fire."

The inspector took a last puff of the cigar, threw it aside, adjusted his uniform and drew himself up to his full height. At that moment,

Duraisami looked every inch a police officer, fully in command of the situation.

"Mr. Rajangam Pillai," he declared, in a clear tone. "I am arresting you on charges of murder, incitement to many more murders, and for setting this house on fire. I must warn you that everything that you are about to say can and will be recorded and used as evidence against you."

Rajangam Pillai stood there, opening and shutting his mouth like a goldfish, unable to utter anything sensible. An officer stepped up to snap a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

The police carried him to the station for interrogation. When they frisked him, they noticed a chain around his neck, on which a key was hung, hidden down the back of his shirt. Without his notice, they removed the key, and then led him to the interrogation chair.

"I have never before heard such heinous accusations," Rajangam Pillai said.

Prabakaran cut in with authority. "That will do, Mr. Pillai. I knew you were the brains behind the whole scheme as soon as I saw Pavanandhan's photo. You sent me purposefully on that wasted trip to all those foreign countries, pretending you wanted me to find Pavanandhan—all just to deflect suspicion from you. You even commissioned Pichaikannu to pretend to *be* Pavanandhan and go travelling around the world just to confuse me. It was on your instructions that Pichaikannu made sure I missed him at every stop. Unfortunately for you, he happened to stand on the balcony of his hotel room when the Indian delegation visited Colombo. That helped me learn the truth. And so, I launched my own investigation into Pavanandhan's disappearance."

"I made a mistake with Pavanandhan," the advocate admitted in a trembling voice. "He was very weak as a child. So I brought in a doctor to make him strong."

"We know that you made him the ward of Dr. Ranjit Singh, who pumped him with chemicals that turned him into a giant," said Prabakaran. "But you wanted to be sure that the scientist's experiment turned out right, so first, you entrusted another boy to him. That was

Ammaniammal's nephew Pakirisami, Pichaikannu's twin brother. Pichaikannu is here, by the way—he has already identified his twin. He was the one who spoke to the monster as a brother, and saved Maheshwari from death. He won the trust of both the monsters.

"You were the brain behind this plot, Mr. Pillai; just for this one crime, we can have you hanged to death. We don't even have to consider Andiappan's murder, or setting the mansion on fire. Your worst crime is subjecting two young human beings to such a hideous experiment, and ruining their entire lives for your personal gain."

"You can prove nothing," smirked the advocate, casually rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. Then he realized the key was no longer there. Beads of sweat appeared on his face; he tried to say something, but then simply collapsed on the ground, unconscious.

31

The Mystery of the Crypt

"There are seven locks on that mysterious tomb, and we need seven keys to open them," said Prabakaran. "We got one from Andiappan, one from Panchanadham, the gardener, and one from Ammaniammal. Rajangam Pillai had another one. The fifth was found on Ranjit Singh's body at the lake. My guess is that the last two keys are with Pakirisami and Pavanandhan... they were wearing pendants. We have to get them!"

"Their bodies should have been brought out of the lake by now," said the inspector. "Wait a little longer."

They went back to the graveyard mound and waited until an officer arrived with the last two keys. They went down into the hall of tombs. Prabakaran shone his torch around the big room; now, for the first time, he saw stone steps leading down from the far west end, behind the tombs. On the top step was a burnt-out candle wick.

"So, this is the entrance to the secret passage," mused Prabakaran. "This links to the mansion. This must have been Pavanandhan's childhood hideout—then, once Ranjit Singh destroyed his mind, it was the

only place that had happy memories. Last night, Pichaikannu hid here with both the monsters. That fiend Ranjit Singh didn't even bother to save his creations!"

"Why do you think Pavanandhan came into the mansion last night?" asked Duraisami, confused.

"The poor kids needed some toys to play with. They had grown into terrible beasts, but at heart they were still childlike and innocent. They found joy in the simplest of things, but they were easily frightened. That's why they were so scared of the scientist."

Prabakaran put the seven keys in the seven locks, opened them, and swung open the heavy wooden door. He entered the crypt first. There was nothing inside but a small tin box. He picked it up, came out and locked the crypt again.

It would have only taken a few seconds to pry open the tin box, but Duraisami couldn't hold his patience any longer. He shot the lock off with his revolver. Inside was a roll of paper—a forty-page ruled school notebook, filled with rows and rows of cramped, handwritten script.

"This is Andiappan's writing. Here, Prabakaran, take a look," said the inspector, handing it over.

32

The Conspirators' Agreement

The undersigned parties assert that they are of sound mind, and under no constraint or undue influence. This document has been written by me, Dr. Andiappan. The undersigned parties agree never to betray one another, at any time, or to evade their responsibilities detailed herein.

Ramanandhan, feudal lord and owner of this estate, also known as 'Gold Bar Saamiyar', died before this agreement was written. He was a severe and domineering man. Ramanandhan had his wealth buried with him in his tomb, and designed a door for it with seven special locks and keys. The keys were to be deposited with seven different trustees. He also willed that the gold buried with him should be handed over to

his only son Pavanandhan when he attained the age of twenty-five.

As the primary trustee, Mr. Rajangam Pillai tried to dissuade Ramanandhan from this strange scheme. But Ramanandhan was adamant. He had consulted his friend Dr. Ranjit Singh, and they were set on the plan.

Ramanandhan had a paralytic stroke three weeks before he died. He lost his motor control and his speech was slurred. While he was in this condition, Mr. Pillai approached him with a confession. He had been swindling his clients for years; suddenly questions were being asked, and he needed a loan of fifty thousand rupees to avoid going to prison. Ramanandhan refused to help. He became angry with the advocate, and flung harsh words at him; his blood pressure shot up and he fell unconscious. Dr. Ranjit Singh was called in. Ramanandhan regained consciousness long enough to tell the scientist about Rajangam Pillai's troubles, unaware that Ammaniammal, Panchanadham, and Pillai himself were all at his bedside listening in. Shortly afterwards, he breathed his last.

Rajangam Pillai was still the sole executor of the will; Ramanandhan died before he could change that. But the other three now knew Pillai's secret. In exchange for their silence, he agreed to split the income from the estate into four. Panchanadham, the gardener; Ammaniammal, the ayah; Dr. Ranjit Singh, the scientist; and Rajangam Pillai, the advocate—they would be equal partners.

The original will, of course, left everything to Pavanandhan. But he was a sickly child, and not very bright. They tried putting him in a boarding school, but he was miserable. They hired me, Andiappan, as his tutor, and let me in the plot. I had just come out of prison after serving time for corruption, and the sum offered by Dr. Ranjit Singh and Mr. Pillai was handsome.

I tried my best to educate the boy, but it was impossible. I reported his slow progress and poor health to the doctor and the advocate. Dr. Ranjit Singh had the idea of using Pavanandhan for his latest experiment; he said he could make him unrecognizable in a few months. He said that just as the queen bee is the only bee in the hive which has the ability to procreate, so too are only a few humans blessed with the ability to use their brains. The rest should devote their energy to developing their physical strength.

I gave my consent for this idea, but the advocate was hesitant. The scientist said that given care of a child for three months, he could prove

his claims. Ammaniammal, the ayah, had two nephews as her wards. She offered Pakirisami, one of the twins, for the first experiment.

I was worried that I might lose my share of the income if Pavanandhan was taken out of my control. That is the reason I drew up this agreement, and recorded a voluntary confession of all our respective crimes. Also, I did not want the wealth to be touched by any one of us without the presence of the other four. The others argued a lot; it was Ammaniammal who finally got them all to agree.

Though Ramanandhan wanted the wealth buried in his own crypt, behind the strange door with seven locks and keys, we placed the jewels, the gold, and the deeds to his properties in the tomb of his ancestor, Devanandhan, instead.

As I draft this agreement, Ranjit Singh's experiments on Pakirisami and Pavanandhan have already begun at Hell's Haven. I saw their transformations with my own eyes, and I was convinced. Pillai and the scientist suggested that I marry Ammaniammal, and a few days ago, I did.

Pavanandhan has no close relatives. There is a distant cousin, who is himself very rich, and is unlikely to even be aware of his relation—so we expect no challenge from him. Once Pavanandhan becomes an adult, we will say that he has gone off to travel the world. So we do not expect anyone to find out what we've done.

We, the undersigned, swear that we will stand by this contract, and never betray each other's trust.

33

The Secret Treasure

"How did Pichaikannu recognize his twin, Pakirisami?" asked the inspector. They were in their car en route to the commissioner's office.

"I think he suspected the monster's identity for a long time," replied Prabakaran, thoughtfully.

They were silent until they entered the office, where an officer was waiting for them.

"Dr. Ranjit Singh has regained consciousness. But he's completely lost his mind," he informed them.

"If he pleads insanity, what will the court do with him?" asked Prabakaran.

"They'll hold him until he becomes sane again, and then hang him. That's all!"

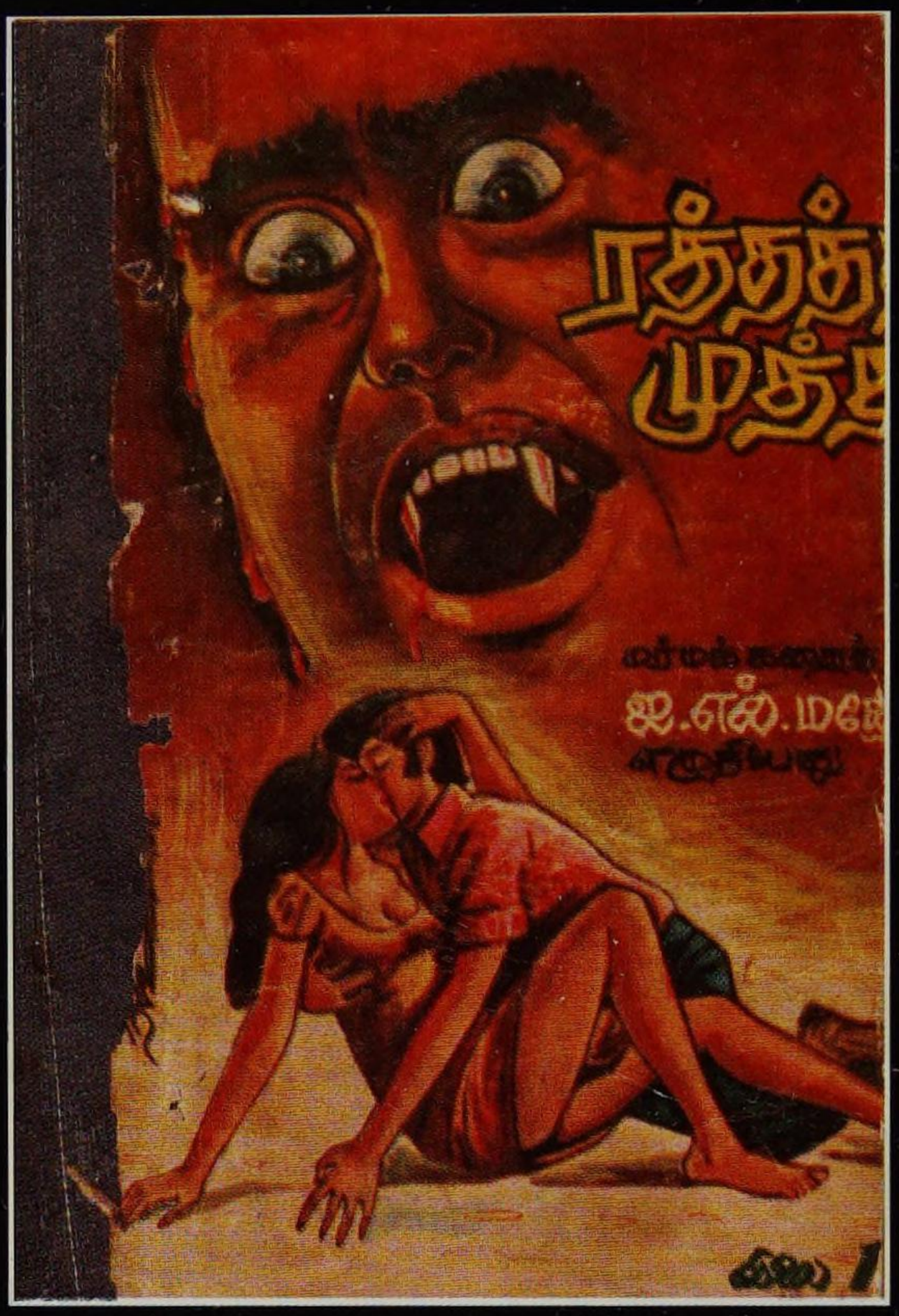
On the day of Ranjit Singh's sentencing, the crowd in the court was nearly uncontrollable. The scientist's insanity had delayed the trial by many months. He had banged his head against the prison bars and screamed at the top of his voice. The prison authorities had appealed to both the mental hospital and the state government, saying that it was impossible to house him with the other prisoners. Then, one morning, out of the blue, he regained his senses.

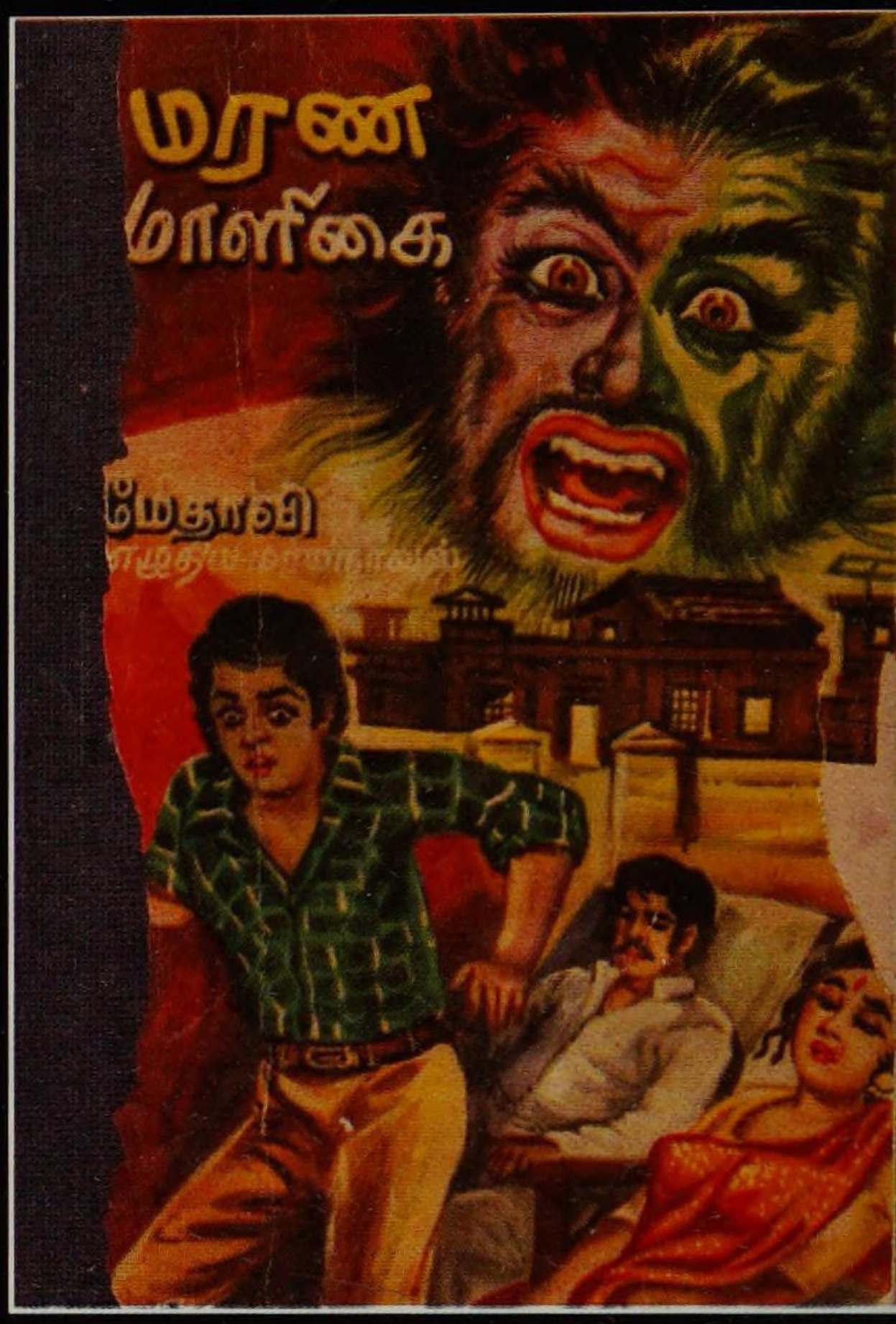
He received a double death sentence for his crimes. The advocate was awarded two life sentences to be served back-to-back. He would spend the rest of his days in prison.

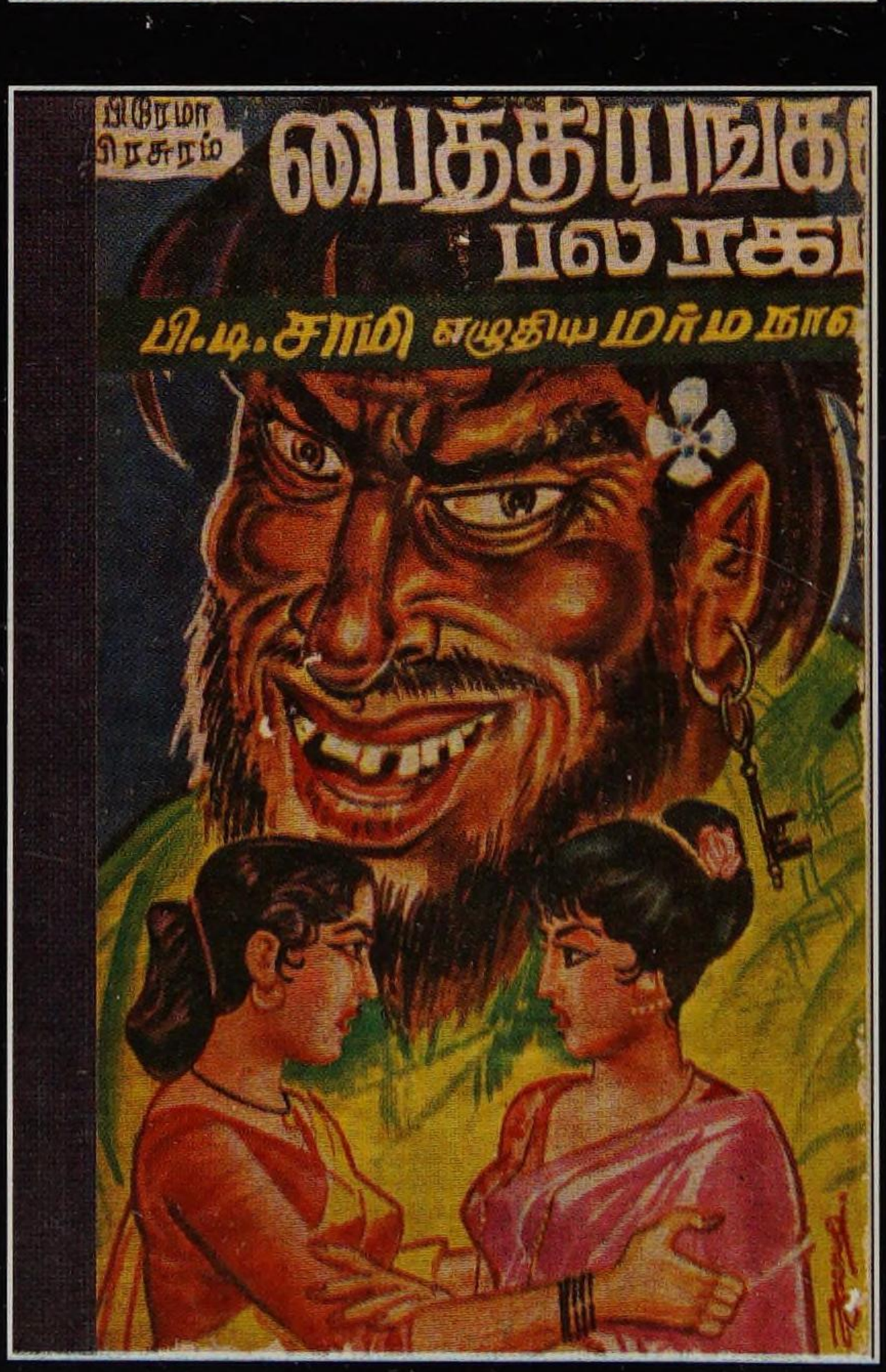
Prabakaran was conspicuously absent from the court. He was getting married that day, in Mambalam, to the heir of the Ramanandhan estate—Maheshwari. Finally, after keeping the secret of their love and affection for each other buried in their hearts for so long, they could now announce it loudly to the entire world!

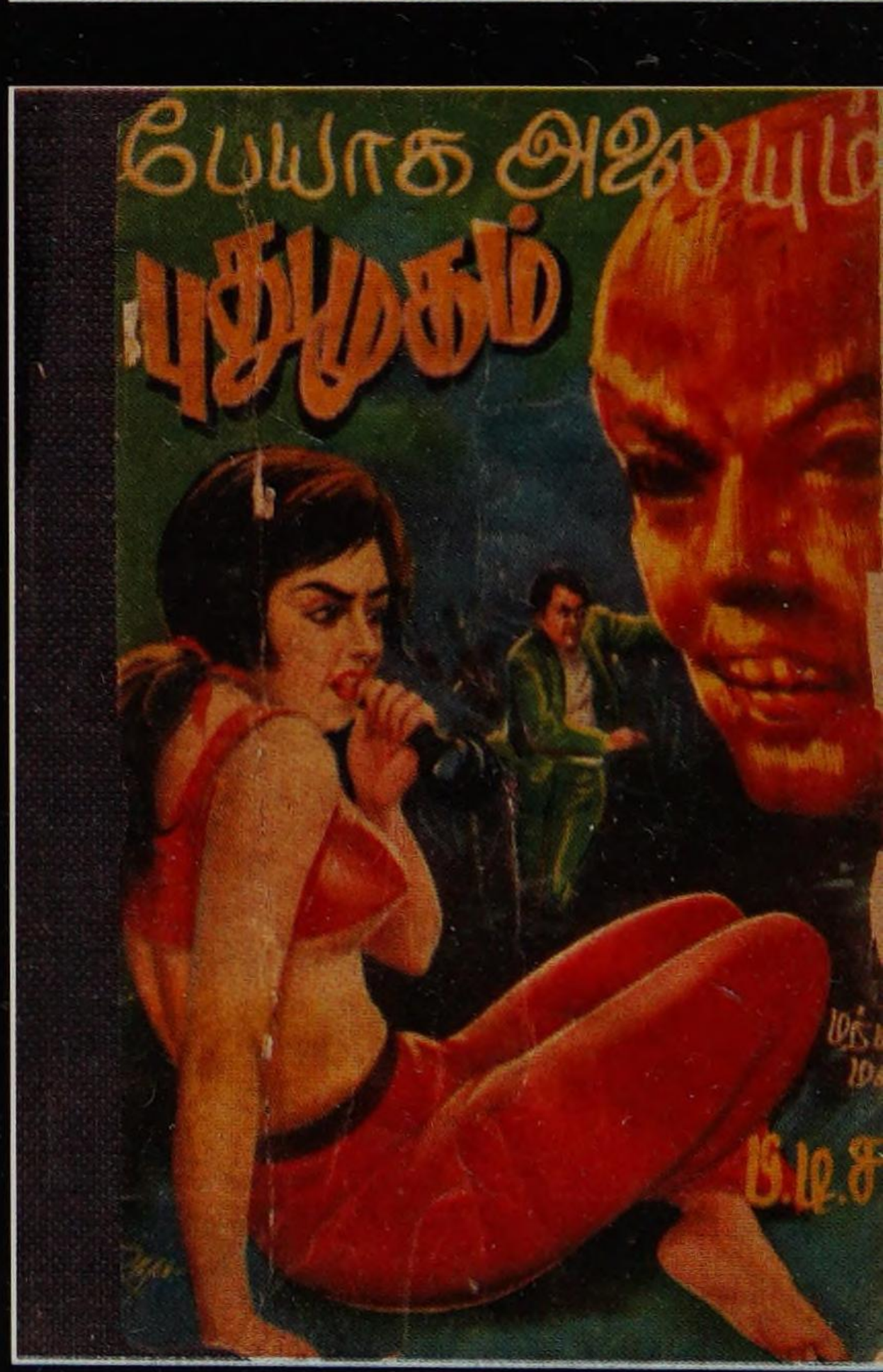


over for *The Ghost Puja*, a "chilling mystery novel" by "the master of ghost stories" P. D. Sami, published by Novel Magudam (Novel Mask) circa 1970. Artist unknown.


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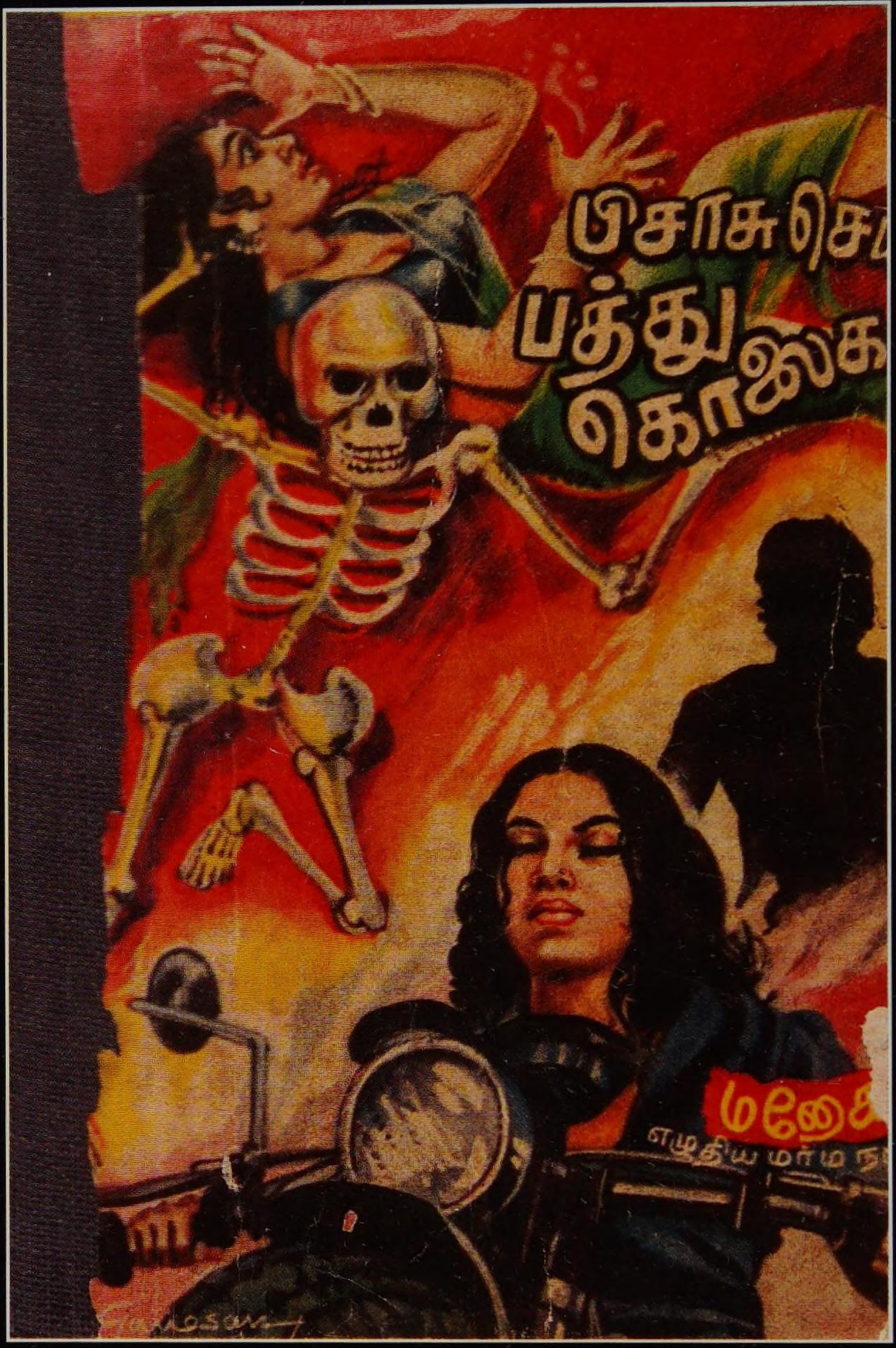

மரண
மாளிகை


பிரேமா
ரசுரம்
பி.டி.சாமி எழுதிய மர்ம நா


புதுமுகம்



1960s/70s horror covers, scanned from library binds. **Opposite page:** Clockwise from top left: *Kiss of Blood* by I. L. Manohar; *Palace of Murder* by Medhavi; *The Haunting Newface* by P. D. Sami; *The Many Faces of Madness* by P. D. Sami. **This page:** *Curse of the Rock Angel* by Ilaiyaraja.

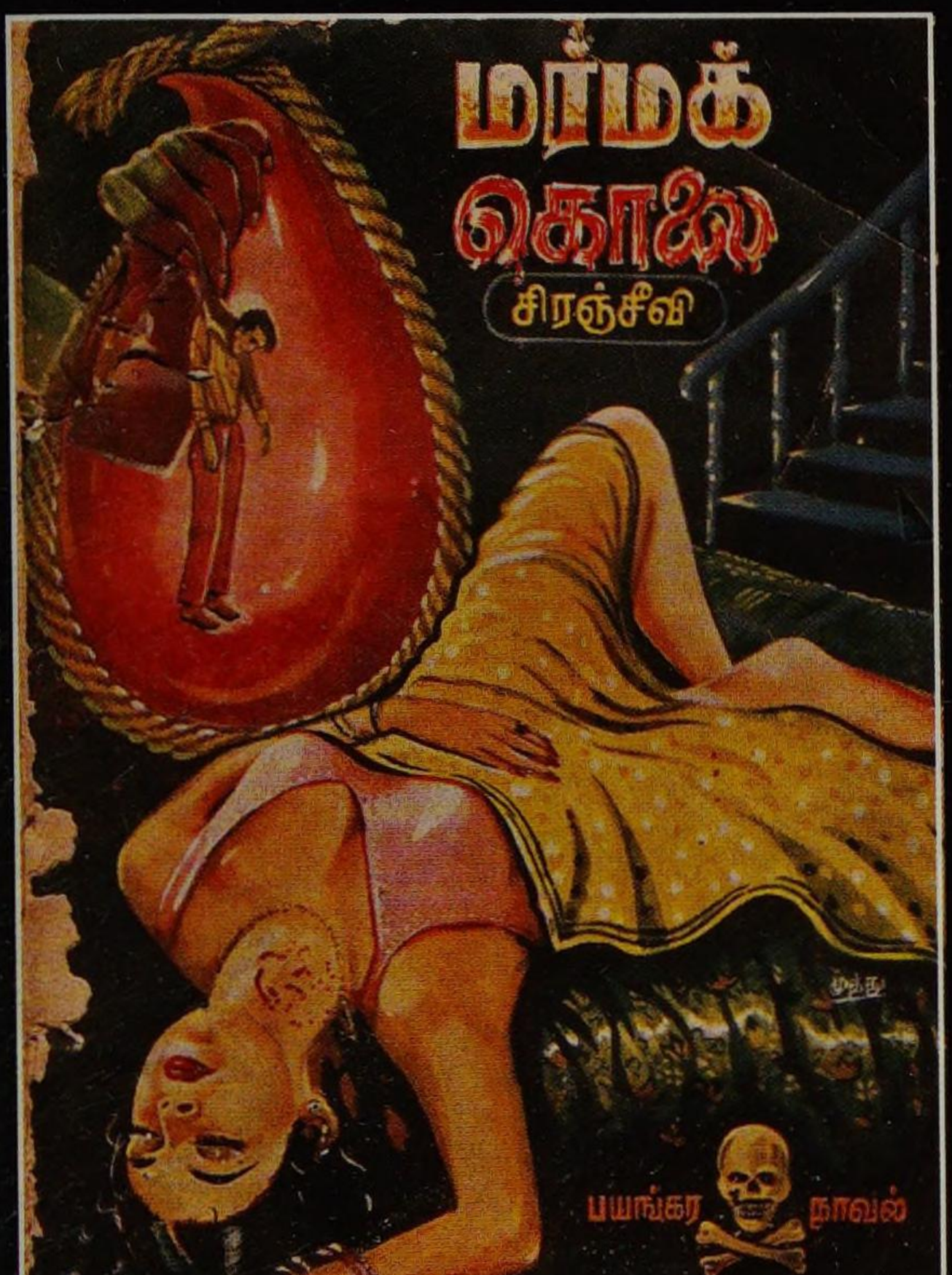


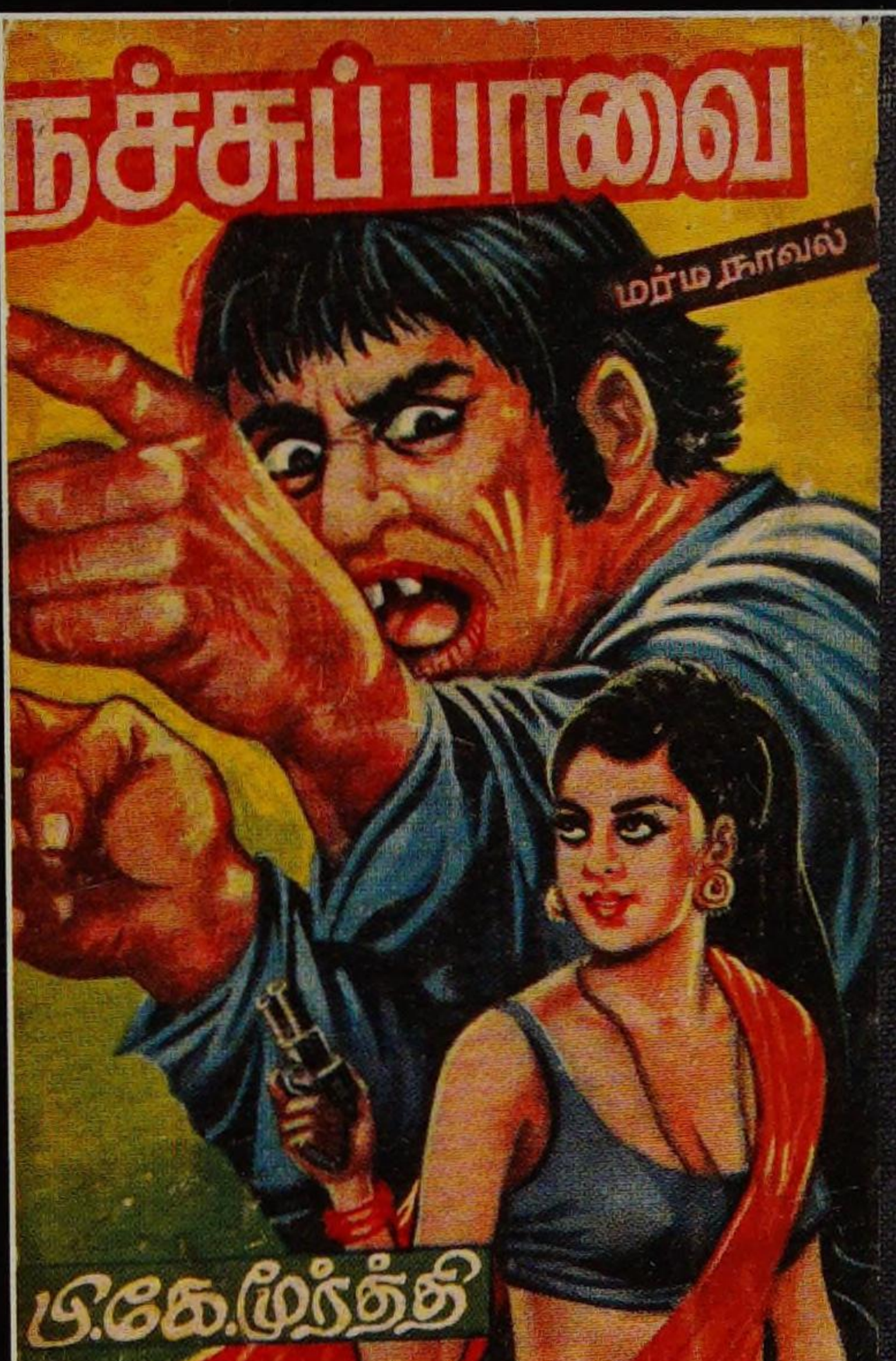
1960s/70s horror and mystery novel covers.

This page: *Ten Murders by the Demon* by Manohar, cover painting by Ganesan.

Opposite page:
Top Row, left to right: *The Mysterious Killing* by Chiranjeevi, cover painting by Muthu; *Venomous Woman* by P. K. Murthy, artist unknown.

Bottom Row, left to right: *The Bloodthirsty Goddess* by P. K. Murthy, artist unknown; Back cover of *Ten Murders by the Demon*, which lists the other titles in the series: *The Temptress Arrives in the Bedroom*, *Phantom Maiden*, *Jasmine Mohini*, *Ten Murders by the Demon*, *A Strange Death in a Plane Crash*, *A Siren's Head on a Laughing Statue*, *The Sledgehammer Killer*, and *Palace of Murder*.


மர்மக்
கொலை
சிரஞ்சீவி
பயங்கர நாவல்


நச்சுப்பாவை
மர்ம நாவல்
பி.கே.மூர்த்தி


கலைப் வொனை
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பி.கே.மூர்

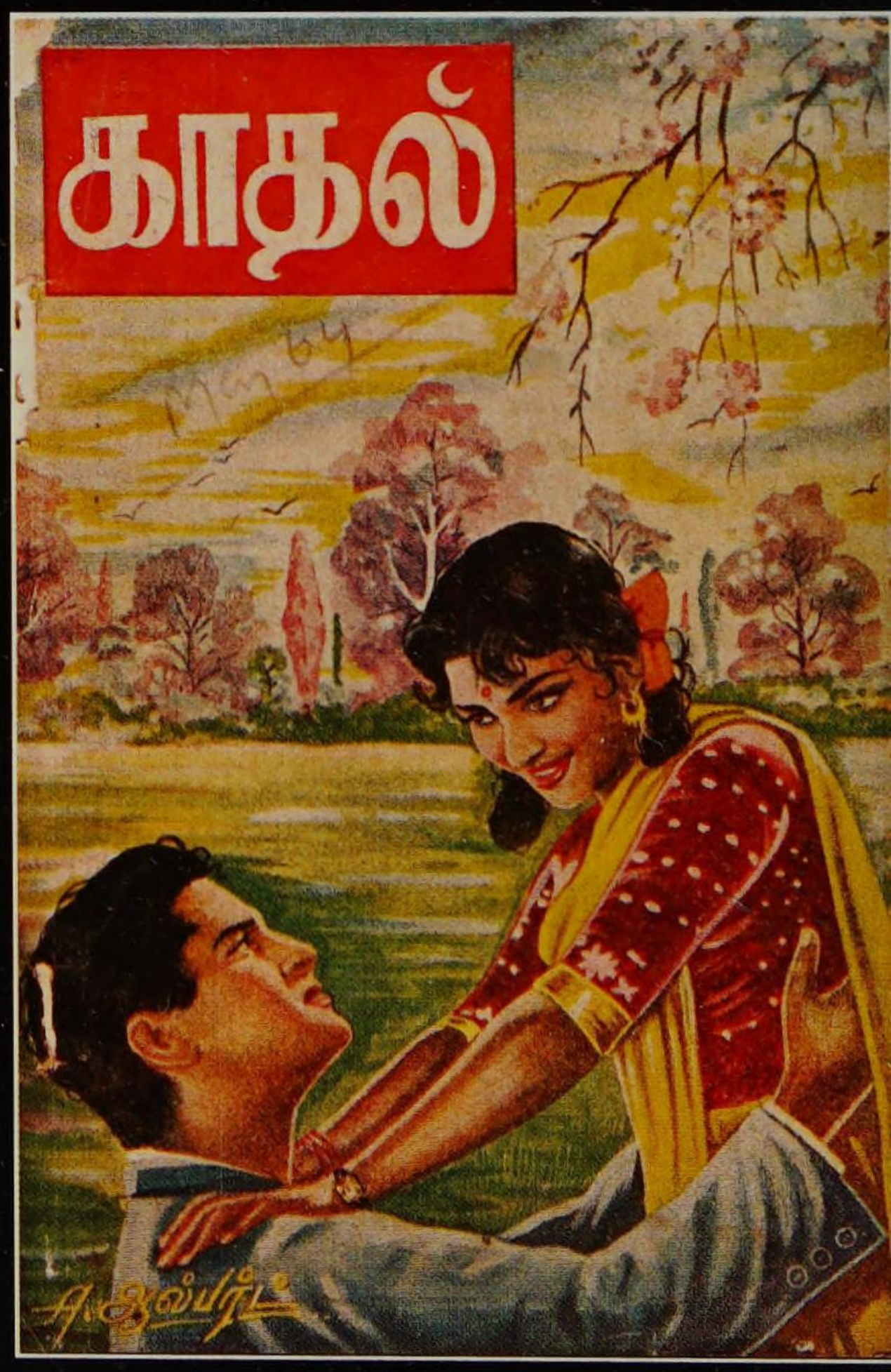

1. படுக்கை அறைக்கு
வந்த புத்ரகாளி.
2. பேய் மங்கை.
3. மல்லிகை பூ மோகினி.
4. பிசாசு செய்த
பத்து கொலைகள்.
5. விமான விபத்தில்
விசித்திர கொலை.
6. சிரிக்கும் சிலையில்
சிங்காரியின் தலை.
7. சம்மட்டி கொலையாளி.
8. மரண மாளிகை.





This page:
Clockwise from top left: Back cover of *Kiss of Blood*, c. 1970; *Pidari's Temple*, a "family story" by Maharishi, c. 1970; March 1964 issue of *Kaadhal* ("Love") magazine, cover by A. Albert.

Opposite page:
Clockwise from top left: *The Treasure of Kazhugumalai*, written and illustrated by Rajprasad, Monkey Comics, c. 1995; *The Jackal Fortress*, story by Vaandumama, illustrated by Ramani, published in a special Pongal comics issue of *Kalki* magazine, 1960s; *Slave Girl*, author/artist unknown, Rani Comics, April 1994.

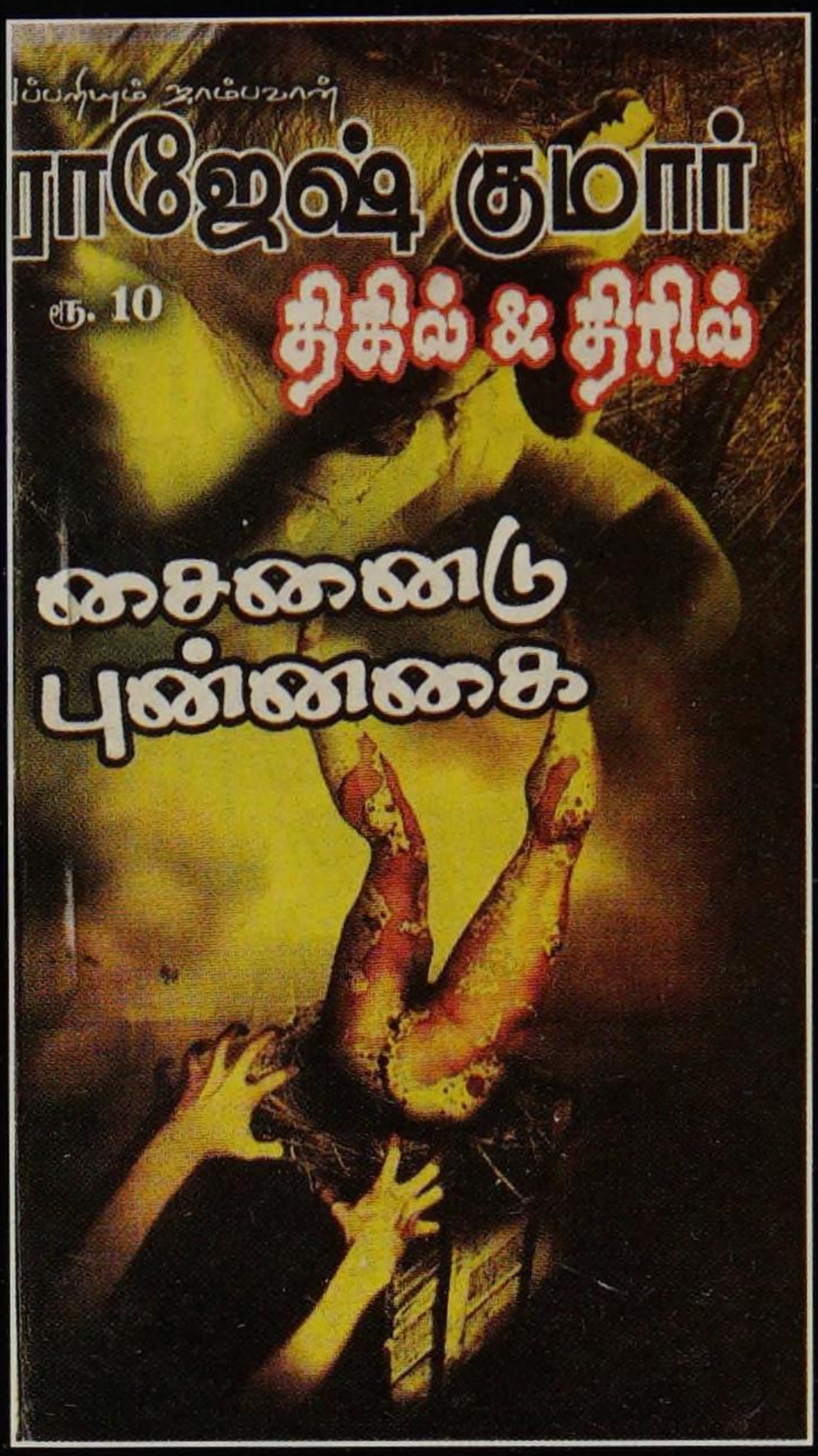


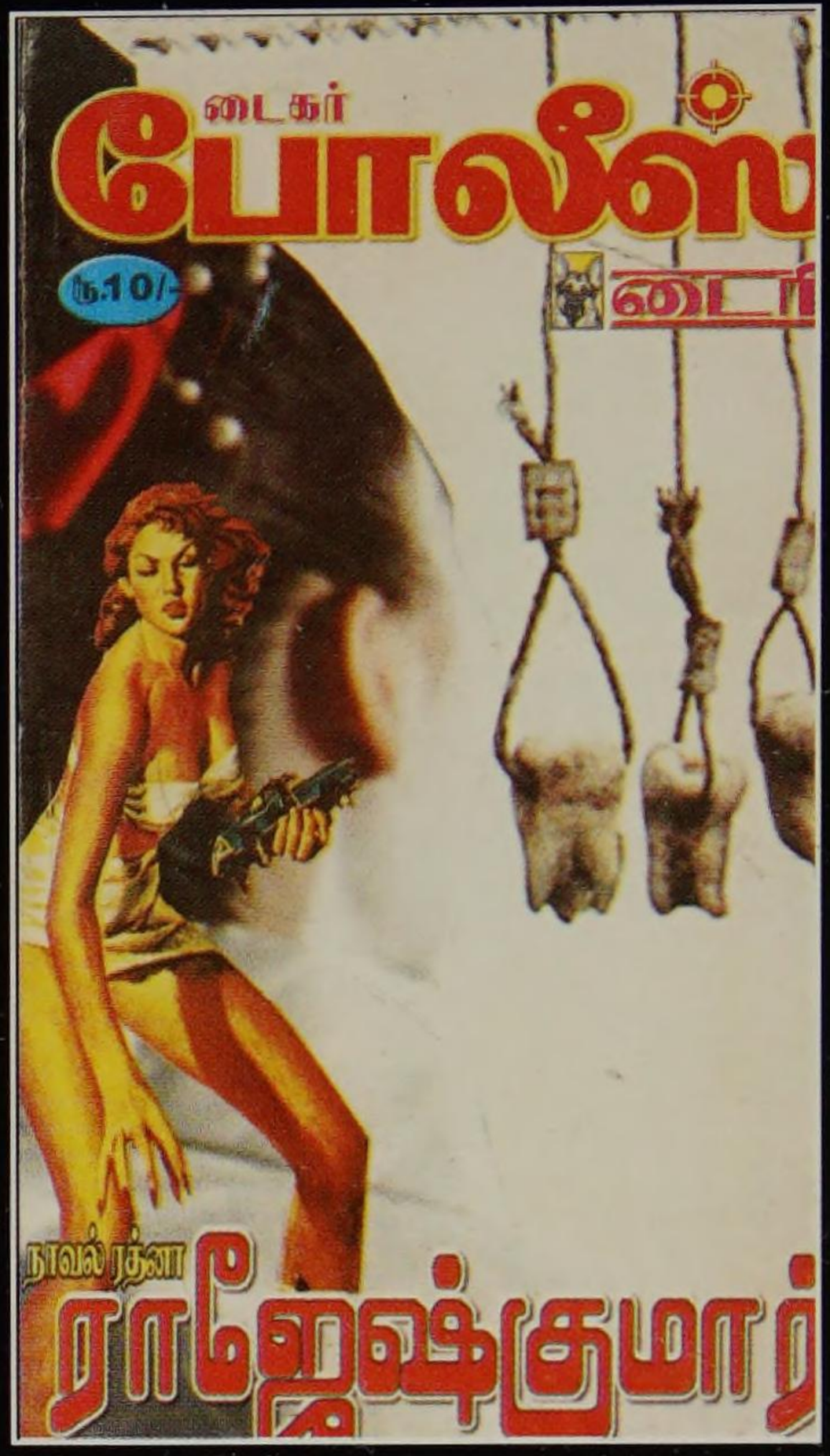




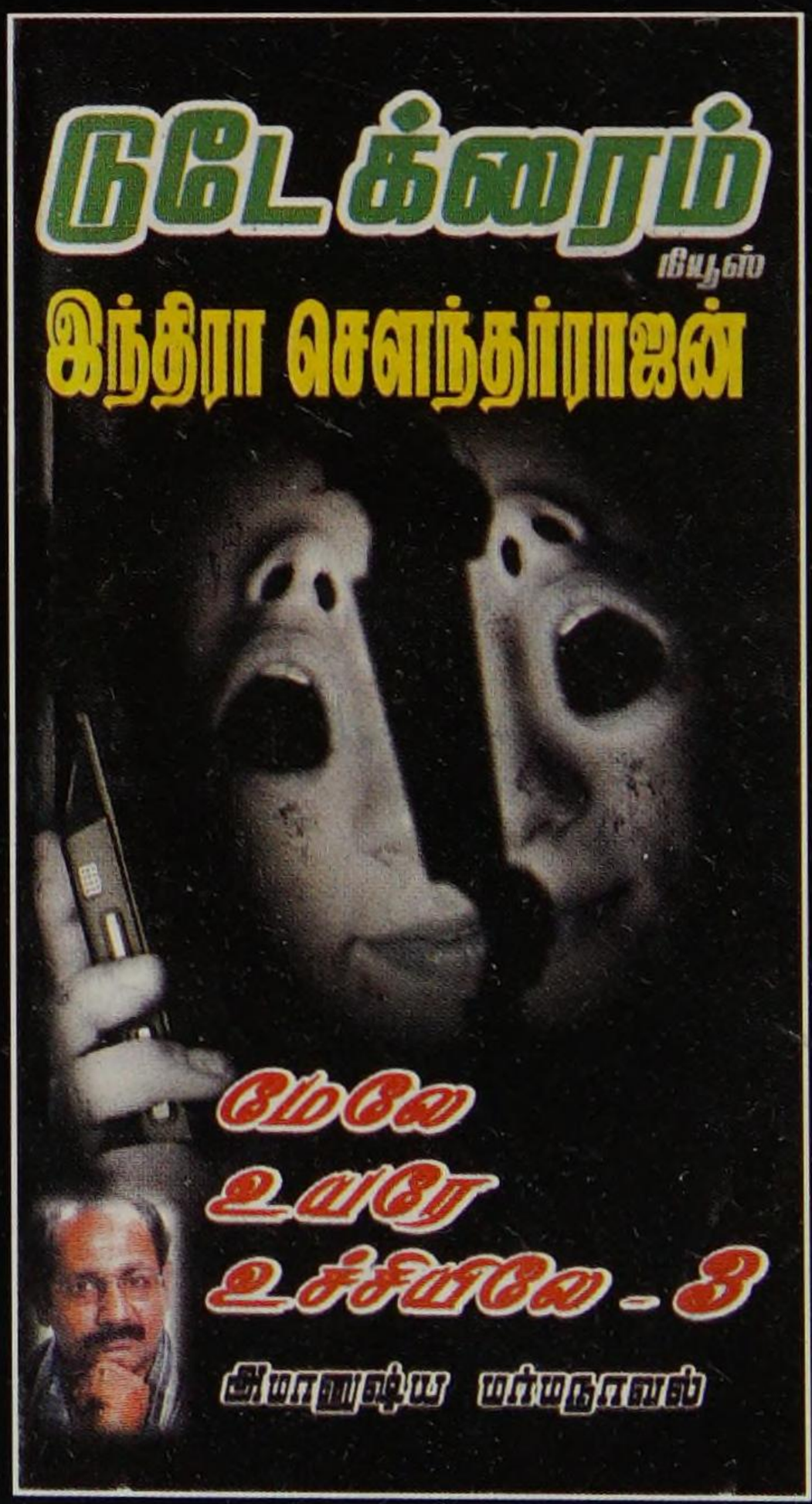
Overleaf:
Top: Rajesh Kumar covers from th
2000s, published in *Horror and Thrill* an
Tiger Police Diary. Bottom: Indra Sound
Rajan covers from the 2000s, published i
Sun Novel and *Today Crime News*.




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மேலே உயரே உச்சியிலே - 3
ஆராவமுத மாயாவல்

INDUMATHI

Indumathi started writing stories as a schoolgirl, publishing them in small literary magazines like *Gnanaratham*, *Kanaiyazhi* and *Kachadathapara*. Today she has around a hundred successful and highly respected literary novels to her credit. Several have been made into teleserials, and many have been notable for tackling subjects seen as controversial. *Anitha* follows an intense, passionate relationship between a psychiatrist and his patient, while *Irandu Per*, co-written with Sivasankari, is about the extra-marital affair of a middle-aged woman.

However, in the late 1970s, shortly after the Hollywood films *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* enjoyed long runs in house-full movie theatres all over Chennai, a young Indumathi was inspired to write some quite different material: a pair of horror novels, both serialized in weekly installments in *Kumudham*.

Be warned. This one gets a little bloody.

HOLD ON A MINUTE, I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF A MURDER

ஒரு நிமிதம் தான், ஒரு கொலை செய்கிறேன் (1979)

1

J. J. Mental Hospital
Dr. K. Jayakumar

From the hospital's expansive grounds, it was obvious that it catered to an extremely privileged clientele. The high-walled compound enclosed a manicured lawn studded with domed lamps, a semi-circular driveway

with separate entry and exit gates, and a paved walkway up to the concrete building, from which emanated the clean fresh scent of phenol. The foyer was like something out of a five-star-hotel! Plush red carpets swallowed the sound of footsteps. At the end of the foyer was a smallish room, pleasantly air-conditioned, and in this room sat the American-educated (at no small expense) brain doctor, K. Jayakumar…

Since the hospital name board was not long enough to list all the degrees he had acquired, he had limited his title to just "Doctor". At the moment, Dr. Jayakumar was on the phone.

"Yeah! Shanthi is all right. I think I can discharge her right away."

" … "

"Yeah, yeah, you can come. Let us know which flight you're coming on."

" … "

"Okay. I'll send the vehicle to the airport."

" … "

"No, no, no problem at all. I am obliged to do at least this much for my patient's mother. You have done so much for our hospital."

" … "

"Okay…thank you."

Replacing the receiver, he felt around in his coat pocket for a cigarette and lit it. He stared at the slogan on the pack—Cigarette Smoking is Injurious to Health—as he inhaled deeply.

His thoughts drifted to Shanthi. A beautiful girl from a rich family; the sole heir to a fortune worth lakhs! No father; only a mother, who had promised to donate a lakh to the hospital—on top of the hefty bill—if Shanthi was cured.

Dreaming of all the things he could do with an extra lakh, he walked to the foyer, heading up to the third room in the twenty-eighth ward to check on Shanthi.

As the lift door opened, he glanced at his wristwatch. Just then he heard the gentlest of voices call out: "Dr. Jayakumar…?" He turned around to see a delicate beauty dressed in a pink chiffon sari, waving to him from the end of the corridor.

Who was she?

He had no clue; he had never seen her before. But she was gorgeous. Should he go to her, or not?

Again, she called, "Dr. Jayakumar, will you come here, please?"

He headed towards her, ignoring the choked scream behind him. Suddenly, a pair of arms caught him from behind and brutally dragged him back. Reflexively, he tried to flip the person over his head… but he slipped, and rolled out onto the portico. The 555 fell from his hand and stingingly kissed his neck…

Sssssssss!

When he came back to consciousness, there was a small crowd gathered around him.

"What happened, Doctor?"

He struggled to his feet and dusted himself off. "Nothing!"

Nobody seemed to believe him.

Stella, the nurse, tried to hold him steady. She could sense him trembling in her hands. She felt that if she let go of him, he would simply fall apart. He seemed so fragile that if a car or a van had driven into the driveway just then and hit him, they would have needed a computer to reassemble his shattered bones. What had happened to him?

She waved the crowd away and whispered, "Relax, Doctor. Have a smoke." She took out the packet from his coat pocket and handed him a cigarette. "You were getting into the lift. How did you land here?"

"Someone called out to me…"

Thinking that the doctor was still shaken up, she asked, "Who was it?"

"Someone in a pink chiffon sari."

"A pink sari? I don't see anyone around..."

"No one?" he asked, puzzled.

"Where do you have to go now?" Stella inquired.

"Ward twenty-eight, room number three…"

"To see Shanthi? Let me come with you."

She took him up to the twenty-eighth ward.

Can we make a tiny detour to catch up with Dr. Jayakumar's bio-data?

Name: K. Jayakumar.
Father's name: J. Krishnasami.
Address: J. J. Mental Hospital, 258, Poonamallee High Road, Chennai.
Education: M.B.B.S., M.S., F.R.C.S., etc., etc.
Immediate family: Mrs. Devasena Jayakumar (wife) & Suresh Jayakumar (son).
Important information: This is first time that he has experienced a loss of memory.

Stella knocked softly on the door of the air-conditioned room. "Come in," called a voice.

"Can I go now, Doctor? My duty is on the ground floor."

"Thank you, Stella."

When Jayakumar entered the room, Shanthi was huddled in a corner. As soon as she saw him, her eyes opened in relief and the lids fluttered agitatedly.

"Doctor, just for today, can you stay here with me? I'm frightened!"

"What is there to be frightened about, Shanthi? You are completely cured. I just called your mother. You are to be discharged tomorrow. So, sleep well for one more day."

"No, Doctor! I *am* frightened! Dr. Benjamin will come here in the evening. I am terrified of him. Please stay with me..."

"Nonsense! Why are you scared of Dr. Benjamin? It's your imagination. He's a gentle person. Patients trust him for his composure and skill. But if you insist, then I will ask a nurse to stay with you..."

"No. I don't want a nurse. You stay."

"How can I? I have other patients."

"There are other doctors, aren't there?"

"It's just not possible, Shanthi. Anyway, he'll only be here for a short while. What is the time now?"

He turned his wrist to check. His watch had stopped at twenty minutes past four!

Instantly the memory flashed; that woman—the woman that no one had seen—the one who beckoned him from the end of the corridor had done so exactly at twenty past four! Everything that had happened since then couldn't possibly have happened in just one minute. This bloody Rado wristwatch had cost him three thousand five hundred rupees. It was an automatic Swiss watch, for god's sake! A watch like that doesn't just stop working!

The woman had called him by his name. No one in the hospital dared to address him like that. They all referred to him as either "Doctor" or "J. J."

He returned to his room and called Stella on the intercom. "Can you do me a favor? Don't tell anyone about the incident. Just tell people that I'm slightly unwell. I'm still confused, myself..."

"Fine, Doctor."

"I'm leaving now. Check on Shanthi when you have the time."

"Yes, Doctor."

He walked out to the parking lot, started his white Fiat, waited for the lights to change at the traffic signals, and finally reached home. He walked into the living room and came to a sudden halt.

His wall clock, too, had stopped at exactly twenty minutes past four!

2

Dr. Benjamin drove his car through the "In" gate. Ignoring the security guard's salute, he drove past the line of Ashoka trees at the edge of the lawn, and came to a stop at the portico. He stepped out of the car regally, disregarding the greeting from Sheila, the receptionist, and walked into his office. Though he wanted to rush off immediately to see Shanthi, he made himself be patient.

In all these years he had never once volunteered to go on rounds in the wards. He was fifty-five years old, with a bald pate, piercing eyes, years of experience in America, and a knowledge of black magic he had gained in the forests of Iran and Iraq. His associates at the hospital knew him only as an expert doctor. They knew nothing about the outlandish

thoughts, ideas, and energies that were constantly running through his mind—and he had felt sure it would stay that way.

Until a week ago, when he had first met Shanthi.

Shanthi! He grimaced.

How does the girl know about me, and how much does she know? She's hardly twenty-three, twenty-four years old. How is she capable of reading my mind? Who is she?

He had tried his best for the past few weeks to gather more information about her. He tried hypnosis, psychiatry, even black magic. But nothing worked. There seemed to be some sort of supernatural force field around her, blocking him in his efforts. She was able to read his intentions and stayed alert throughout the sessions. Today, he *had* to succeed. He could feel his nerves tightening, and fresh warm blood rushing to his brain.

Not right away. Let everybody in the hospital go to sleep. Let the bright corridor lights be switched off and the night lamps turned on. Wait for another couple of hours. Maybe a cup of hot tea will help.

He pressed the buzzer for the office boy. As usual, the boy did not respond to the first call. Benjamin had never made an issue of it, as the boy had many more uses besides fetching him tea. There was no point calling again. Changing his mind about the tea, he shut his office door. He returned to his comfortable swivel chair and sat down in lotus position. Before settling down, he flicked the switch for the red light outside his door, to make sure he would not be disturbed. He filled his lungs with a deep breath of air, closed his eyes, and concentrated on a point in the center of his forehead, between his brows. He held his pen in his left hand and chanted softly. (Note that Benjamin was right-handed.)

"Spirits that occupy the heavens, I beseech one of you to come forward and speak to me through this pen. Please, may I be visited by an Iranian ghost and may I be spoken to in Farsi. Please make haste... Please make haste.... Please make—"

The next moment, the pen that he gripped in his left fist automatically began to write on a piece of paper on the table. Benjamin kept his eyes shut. There was a slight smile playing on his lips. Five minutes later, the pen stopped. Benjamin relaxed in his chair and then slowly rose.

Ignoring the pen slipping from his grip and rolling onto the ground, he picked up the paper eagerly and read. A look of cruel satisfaction spread on his face.

He thought for a second, then switched off the red light and came out to the corridor. The hospital was nearly asleep. Gopal had taken over from Sheila at the reception desk... There was an eerie stillness in the corridors. Shivering slightly in the darkness, Benjamin entered the lift and went up to the second floor, where he met Stella in the twenty-eighth ward.

"Good evening, Doctor."

"Good evening. How is Shanthi?"

"She seems distressed."

"Distressed? Why?"

Stella avoided his eyes. She knew they were no ordinary eyes; she always felt they were penetrating into her darkest secrets. She had her doubts about Benjamin, but had never spoken about them to anyone. Still, some intuition warned her to be on her guard around him.

"I have no idea, Doctor. You should check on her yourself."

He hesitated for a second at the door of room number three, then opened it, entered the room, and shut the door softly behind him. In the semi-darkness he could see Shanthi's eyes glowing like radium. Uneasy, he snapped on the room light. To his surprise, he saw that Shanthi was just now opening her eyes. Then what were the lights he had seen?

At once, she sat up on the bed and screamed. "*Dey*, what are you doing here? Get out of my room. Go!"

Disregarding her, Benjamin approached the bed and said, "Stop yelling Shanthi! I don't understand why you hate me so much. Relax, please!"

"I don't like you. I don't trust you."

"But I want to know why! I am your friend, here to help you, not to make you suffer," he said, gently caressing her head. He could feel her slowly easing under his touch.

"Please lie back," he said. She did. "Look straight into my eyes. Do not look away from my index finger. Relax your body completely."

He took a pencil out of his left pocket and switched it to his right. Shanthi was now completely hypnotized.

"Shanthi, do you know who I am?" he asked softly.

"Yes, Benjamin."

"Did you know me before you came here?"

"Yes…"

"Really?"

"Really."

"Do you know everything about me?"

"Yes…"

His expression changed. It was as though a spotlight with an angry red gel had been focused on him.

"Shanthi, tell me. What is this in my hand?"

"A pencil."

"Look hard, Shanthi. Are you sure?"

"No, it's not a pencil."

"Then what is it? It's a sharp dagger, isn't it? Do you want to check to see how sharp it is?"

"No!"

"Do you know what this is called?"

"I don't know."

"A stiletto. Go ahead and try it."

"No…"

The moment she said it, he swept aside her sari and grazed her exposed abdomen with the blade. She sat up in bed and said, "Benjamin, can I have the knife for a moment?"

"Sure," he replied, casually handing over the pencil.

"Doctor, do you know what this is?"

"A pencil, of course."

She stood up. "Benjamin, are you sure this is only a pencil, and not a stiletto?"

He grinned. "Of course!"

"Dey! Is this not a dagger? Is this not a stiletto? Will it not draw blood?"

The threat in her voice drained his confidence, and he edged towards the door.

Shanthi was faster. She was at the door in a flash. Kicking it shut, she turned to him with a fierce look.

"Shanthi, stop playing games. Open the door," he demanded.

Without blinking her eyes, she drove the sharp pencil point into his stomach. Even as the pain spread and blood began to pour from the wound, he wondered, "How is it that she too knows this Persian sorcery, of changing a pencil into a blade?"

Shanthi pulled the tip out and drove it hard into Benjamin's skull. He slid to the ground slowly. Darkness took over completely, as a stream of red liquid trickled out into the corridor from under the door.

3

Dr. Jayakumar tried his best to hide his fear and confusion, but to no avail. He was sweating profusely, staring unblinkingly at the still wall clock. Just what was happening to him? Where did that pink-chiffon-sari woman disappear to? Were the stopped clocks a hallucination?

Frustrated, he called out to his wife, Devasena. She came out running from the bedroom, where she had been helping Suresh change his clothes.

"What happened?" she asked, tense.

"How did this clock stop?"

She gaped at him in surprise. "You were yelling for such a trivial thing? I got scared when I heard your tone. It's nothing; I must have forgotten to wind it up."

"You're the one being silly. This is an automatic clock. It doesn't need winding up. So why did it stop?"

"Oh yes… you're right," Devasena wondered aloud. "Should I send it to the shop to be fixed?"

"Let's wait for a couple of days."

Jayakumar spent a long time under the hot shower, using up more than half a bar of the white imported soap. Then, dressing in a striped pajama and kurta, he came out to the lawn and sat in the cane chair. He

distractedly engaged in a conversation with his wife and Suresh, played a bit with their pet Pomeranian, and then lapsed into deep thought. *Please stay with me...* Shanthi's words were ringing in his ears.

He sent the gardener to fetch his car keys and started towards the garage.

"You look troubled," Devasena asked hesitantly. "Is there a problem? You've been acting moody since you came home. Do you want to talk about it?"

"It's nothing much, Devasena. I'm just preoccupied with a difficult patient. In fact, let me go back and check on her. I'll feel better, then."

"You won't be *too* long, will you?"

As he pressed down the accelerator, he could not shake the feeling that something, somewhere, was terribly wrong.

Ten minutes later, he honked for the security at the hospital gates. There was no response. He got out himself, opened the gates, and drove into the parking lot. He saw that the ground floor of the hospital was strangely empty. The reception desk, the nurses' lounge, the corridor... all were deserted. Where had everyone disappeared to? He took the lift to the second floor.

Getting out, he saw the entire staff crowded in the brightly lit corridor. Seeing him, they ran up, crying, "Doctor! Dr. Benjamin has been stabbed to death!"

"What?" So his intuition had been right! "When did this happen?"

"Just now, in Shanthi's room."

"Where is she?"

"She's gone back inside the room."

"Have you informed the police?"

"Yes, at once."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I just did. Your wife said you were on your way here."

By now Jayakumar's fear had subsided and was replaced with a new tension. *Should I go into Shanthi's room? Maybe I shouldn't. If this proves to be a murder, my hospital's reputation will be ruined! How can I keep the press out of it? Even if I do manage to shut the press up, what guarantee do I have that all these people will keep quiet?*

Even as the questions raced through his mind, he heard a jeep pulling up outside. Heavy booted footsteps followed.

Inspector Shankar Ram—over six feet tall, as handsome as a film star, with cropped hair, a prominent nose and a pencil thin moustache—stood in front of Jayakumar.

"Doctor, point me to the room where the murder took place. I shall finish with my formalities there, and then I have some questions for you."

Questions, questions. Jayakumar was already tired. He lit a cigarette, and wordlessly pointed out the room.

"Three-forty-two, come with me."

The inspector, accompanied by a lean constable, entered the room. Shanthi was sitting on her cot, quiet. Benjamin's body lay face down on the floor. The inspector looked sharply at Shanthi. Then they bent down to draw a line around Benjamin's body, gather fingerprints and photograph the corpse from various angles.

"Madam, did you witness the murder?" the inspector asked Shanthi.

"What? Murder?" she shrieked.

Of course, he thought; this *was* a mental hospital, after all.

"Constable, find me the person who saw the body first."

The constable came back with a nurse.

"Sir," she told the inspector, "I think this woman killed him with a sharp pencil." She pointed to Shanthi.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Sheba. I'm a nurse here."

"What did you see?"

"I was on my ten-o'-clock rounds when I saw a stream of blood coming from under this door into the corridor. I shouted for the security guard and the other nurses before I opened the door."

"So, the door was shut until then?"

"Yes."

"Did it open easily when you pushed it?"

"Yes."

"What did you see inside?"

"Dr. Benjamin was lying on the floor, while this woman sat quietly on her bed."

"How many years have you been working here?"

"Four years."

"Do you know this woman?"

"Yes. She has been under treatment here for mental illness for the past one month."

"Why do you think she is the murderer?"

"Because there was no one else in the room..."

"It that enough of a reason?"

Sheba did not reply.

"Go on, is that enough?"

"Well, that's what all of us here suspect; the security, the other nurses, and the office boy..."

"Are there any sharp instruments in the room?"

"We don't keep things like that within reach of the mental patients. She did have a sharpened pencil in her hand though..."

"What nonsense," snapped the inspector, exasperated. He walked over to Jayakumar. "This is all very confusing. I can clearly see that the body has been stabbed with a blade. So why is your staff trying to insist it was done with a pencil? Are they playing some sort of prank? We need to find the culprit. I have questioned everyone except your patient Shanthi. I'll go back to her."

When he entered the room again, Shanthi respectfully rose to her feet.

"Do you remember when you were admitted in this hospital?" he asked her.

"Inspector, let's not beat around the bush," she replied. "You want to know who killed Benjamin. Before that, there are a few things you should know about him. He used to make dolls out of black cloth and pierce them with needles. Voodoo! Of course you police will not believe me, and neither will the law. But I know for a fact that Benjamin committed several murders using his black magic like this, without leaving a single trace. Dilip Bannerjee, of Bangalore, in 1960; in 1964, a murder in Mylapore; a man named Basavappa, in 1979; and a woman named

Leelavathiammal, in Anna Nagar, in April 1981… In each of these cases, the police closed the file for lack of evidence. Do you want to know how each of these was accomplished? Come closer and I shall tell you, Inspector…"

The inspector approached very cautiously.

"Don't be so scared. It's just an ordinary pencil."

Shankar Ram reached out for the red-and-black-striped Natraj pencil, with its very sharp tip.

"Would you say it is possible," asked Shanthi, "to pierce a person's stomach and skull with this pencil?"

"Never!"

After a thorough look, he held it out to Namasivayam, his assistant.

At a small gesture from Shanthi, the pencil levitated into the air and flew back into her palm.

For the first time the two policemen were convinced of the presence of some supernatural force.

"Never, you say? Inspector, show me your palm."

He extended his palm, and Shanthi made a few quick swipes.

As Shankar Ram stared in horror, not even immediately registering the shooting pain, a trickle of blood appeared on his hand.

4

"Dr. Jayakumar, any suggestions on how to proceed from here?" asked Shankar Ram.

Jayakumar slowly raised his bloodshot, sleepless eyes. His head felt heavy. He was tired and listless. Dispiritedly, he replied:

"I don't understand any of this. I'm unable to think straight. You have to do me one favor… you have to make sure the hospital's name doesn't appear in the press. Our reputation will be destroyed. Can you promise me this?"

Shankar Ram ignored the request. "Has Benjamin's family been informed? Where is his house?"

"Close by, next to Hotel Dasaprakash… yes, his family has been told," said Jayakumar.

"Namasivayam, have you informed the commissioner?" asked the inspector.

"Yes sir, he is expected any minute." Namasivayam paused for a moment. "Sir, do you believe in ghosts and spirits?"

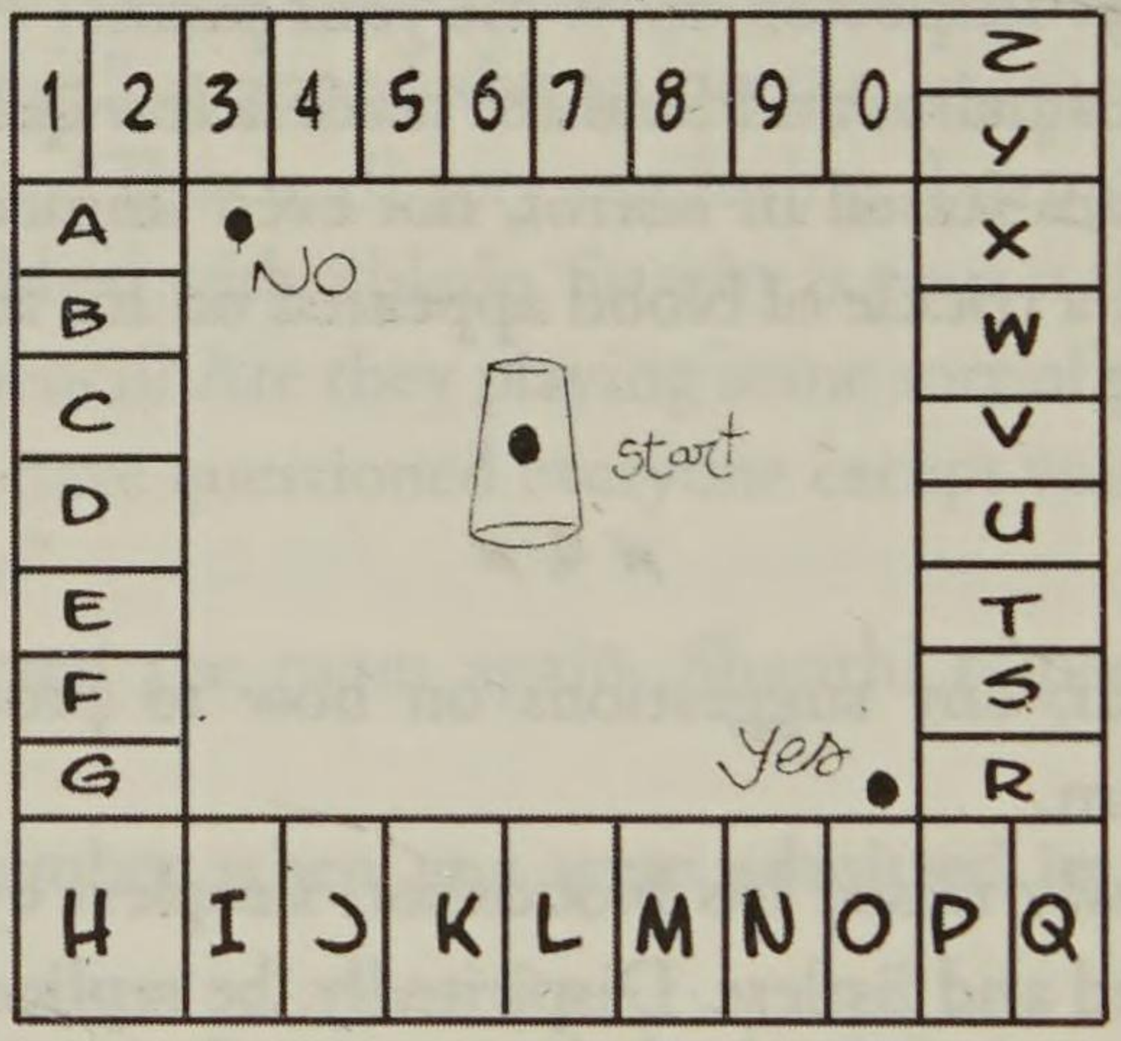
"Of course not. What a question!"

"Perhaps it may prove useful in this case to use a planchette."

"What's a planchette?"

"If you'll permit me, I'll show you—before the commissioner gets here. Doctor, can I have a candle, a steel tumbler and a piece of chalk, please? Hurry..."

When these articles were brought, Namasivayam used the chalk to mark a large square on the floor, and draw boxes along the inner edge. On three sides he spelled out the alphabet in capitals, one letter in each box. On the fourth side he wrote the numbers one to ten. In two corners he wrote the words "yes" and "no".



He lit the candle and covered it with the tumbler. Then he placed his forefinger on the tumbler and said, "Doctor, would you join me?"

Reluctantly, Jayakumar joined him on the floor and placed his forefinger on top of his. Namasivayam shut his eyes and said a silent prayer. The tumbler began to move swiftly within the square.

"Are either of you moving it?" demanded Inspector Shankar Ram.

"No, sir!" they cried in unison.

The inspector joined them on the floor, his eyes glued to the planchette.

Namasivayam began firing off question after question, and the tumbler spelled out the replies.

He began with:

"Was this a murder?"

Yes

"Who is the murderer?"

B-A-N-N-E-R-J-E-E

"Where is he now?"

I-N-S-H-A-N-T-H-I-S-B-O-D-Y

"So it was Bannerjee who killed Benjamin, using Shanthi's body?"

Yes

"How can we prove this?"

Y-O-U-C-A-N-N-O-T

"Should we arrest Shanthi?"

N-O-D-R-O-P-T-H-E-C-A-S-E

"No! I must know more about Shanthi and Bannerjee!"

N-O-P-E-R-M-I-S-S-I-O-N-T-O-T-E-L-L

"Who else can help us?"

S-R-I-D-H-A-R-A-N-N-A-M-B-I-Y-A-R

"Who is that? Where can we find him?"

P-O-N-N-A-G-A-R-A-M

"What is Ponnagaram?"

A-V-I-L-L-A-G-E-P-A-S-T-T-A-M-B-A-R-A-M

"Who is this Sridharan Nambiyar?"

A-W-A-R-L-O-C-K

"How does he know about Shanthi and Bannerjee?"

The tumbler moved swiftly and angrily.

D-O-N-O-T-I-N-T-E-R-R-O-G-A-T-E-M-E

"I'm sorry. It's a habit that comes with my job. Please proceed."

U-N-A-B-L-E-T-O-G-I-V-E-F-U-R-T-H-E-R-I-N-F-O-R-M-A-T-I-O-N-Y-O-U-A-R-E-V-E-R-Y-R-U-D-E

After this the tumbler refused to budge.

The three men looked at each other incredulously. Just then a car pulled up in the portico. A moment later, Commissioner Joseph MacZee marched into the corridor, to be greeted by several smart salutes.

"Good evening, Shankar Ram. Since you handled the investigation, I'll start with you," said the commissioner. "There are too many loose ends in this case. I know it seems as if there is something 'occult' involved here, but we need to analyze things systematically. I'm going to ask you a few questions. Tell me the first answer that comes to you mind."

"Okay, sir."

"In your opinion, was this a deliberate murder or an accident?"

"Murder, sir."

"Who was the first person to discover the murder?"

"Sheba, the staff nurse."

"Were there any eyewitnesses?"

"No."

"Who is the prime suspect?"

"Shanthi. She was in the room. She's a mental patient."

"What was the weapon used?"

"A sharpened pencil, sir."

"A pencil? What the hell are you talking about? You've been a policeman for too long to give me ridiculous answers like this."

"I'm sorry to say this, sir. The murder weapon was indeed a pencil. That woman showed us the pencil. She claimed that it wasn't really a pencil, but a stiletto, a kind of a dagger. She actually slashed my palm with it. The wound is still raw."

"I still cannot accept this. What was the exact time of the crime?"

"We can confirm that only after the postmortem report comes in."

"Have you filed an FIR?"

"Not yet sir. We are wondering what to put in it. We thought we'd consult you before we filled out the form."

"Is this some kind of joke? Did forensics dust for fingerprints?"

"They did. They claim there are no fingerprints anywhere in the room."

"I can't believe you people. You two have been tough cops for over twenty years, and here you are swearing that the murderer used a pencil to kill. Did you at least question this woman Shanthi?"

"Yes sir. Here is the report."

"Excuse me, in case you have forgotten, this is a felony offense. You cannot file this nonsense as the statement of the accused. You get a proper report ready with the help of Namasivayam, off the record. I shall clear it with the higher officials. I want the FIR and a statement on my table tomorrow." The commissioner rose to leave when he noticed the planchette diagram drawn on the floor.

"What is this?" he roared.

Shankar Ram explained what had happened with the planchette, and gave him the paper in which he had noted down Sridharan Nambiyar's address.

"Wonderful! Add to the fun," scoffed MacZee, stuffing the paper into his pocket as he stormed off.

5

The four-foot-by-two-foot gate opened into the bright sunlight. The man bent his head, placed his right foot outside the cell block, and stepped out.

"How soon can we expect you back?"

"Never!"

Under the Gandhi photographs decorating the wall, on a huge table, the superintendent signed his name in a tattered register and then turned it towards him. A huge bundle of currency notes was handed over.

"How is it that you have so much money?" asked the jailer.

"Dr. Benjamin sent me some every month."

"This much?"

The man passed the row of tiny gates to a bigger one, and then out into a bigger, happier world. Even the scorching sun and the uniformed police seemed pleasant and beautiful. Along the compound wall, police vans were lined up to shuttle prisoners to court and back.

He thought of the long days inside the prison. Even inside, he'd had some degree of freedom. There were good books to read, an old M.G.R. film on television once in a while, and on special occasions fat Hindi-speaking women would line them up, tie a string around their wrists and distribute sweets.

Still, he'd never go back. He had encountered enough corruption, envy, hatred and deprivation to last a lifetime. He didn't need any more. He was done with ruining his life for Dr. Benjamin.

He remembered the first time he had met Benjamin, ten years ago. He had been shamming as a pavement fortune teller in Parry's Corner. That day Benjamin had parked his car, gotten out, given him a ten rupee note and challenged him to make some real predictions. Without quite knowing why, he had accepted the challenge.

The days he had roamed the forest with Malayalee warlocks had not been wasted. He knew a few spells; he could read a customer's dreams from the depths of his eyes, and tell them back to him. This required deep concentration. But there on the pavement, the most he could charge was a mere rupee, so he did not use any of these skills. He simply crouched, hidden under a black blanket, and made casual predictions. Still, even at this game, he made quite a bit of money.

At that time, Benjamin's challenge had seemed to be an insult to his true skills. So, using every strain of knowledge he had, he exposed everything about Benjamin, including his previous lives on earth. Benjamin was impressed and immediately recruited him, paying him a handsome advance. The two men involved themselves deeply in the pursuit of knowledge of astrology and magic, spending piles of money buying up every book on these subjects. They interned with the warlocks of Kerala. It was during that period that he—Paul Alexander—became Benjamin's trusted sidekick.

His job was to wait in the burning ghats till midnight, collect the skulls from the corpses, use the skulls to mix strange ingredients into paste, test the magical properties of the pastes, and then hand them over to Benjamin. For this he was paid handsomely.

Once, Paul Alexander had kidnapped three children and brought them to a dilapidated house in Sriramapuram for one of Benjamin's

experiments. All three children had died. Not wanting to waste the corpses, Paul Alexander had burnt them in the backyard. As he was meditating next to the pyre, waiting for their fresh young skulls to be ready, a realization had crept up on him.

There was no way Benjamin had hired him simply for his paltry knowledge of astrology.

The man had much larger designs.

Once this thought took hold, he became obsessed. He gathered all the information he could about Benjamin's past. What he learned terrified him. Benjamin was no small-fry fortune-teller like him. That day when he had thrust a ten-rupee note in his face and stood astounded as he made his predictions, it had all been an act!

But by the time he came to see Benjamin's true colours, it was too late. The charred remains of the three children were discovered, and Paul Alexander was accused as the murderer. Benjamin gave him the name of a law firm and quickly disappeared, letting him handle the mess.

The lawyers sucked him dry like leeches, but they were at least competent enough to keep him from the hangman's noose. He was awarded fourteen years imprisonment in a solitary cell in the Central Jail.

Fourteen years! In an eight-foot-by-eight-foot cell, behind bars!

To be fair to Benjamin, though, in all those years, he had not once failed to send him money in the prison. Now Paul Alexander had twenty-four thousand in hard cash. He could invest in a petty shop, and bid farewell to Dr. Benjamin and all his nefarious activities.

He had promised himself this many times over in his cell. It was time to go and meet Benjamin in person.

Outside the prison, he jumped into a cruising auto. He had the first part planned. He headed to Hotel Ranjit. The hot *dosai*, *vadai*, *puri* and special coffee hit the spot. Next he walked down the corridor to the hotel men's salon, where he had his hair styled, trying to go for a look like Kamal Hasan had in the movies. Next, he headed towards Maharaja Textile Showroom on Mount Road, where he got himself a new pair of readymade trousers and a shirt. He changed in the dressing room there and threw away his old clothes. The cinema banner opposite the showroom sparked another idea. How long had it been since he had

seen a film in a theatre? Not pausing, he charged in. When he came out three hours later, he was softly whistling a tune: *Podhuvaaga en manasu thangam...*

He asked the person passing by for the time. 7.30!

He wondered if he should just barge in on Benjamin, or if he should call him first on the phone. He decided he would meet him face to face. He opened his tiny diary for the address of J. J. Mental Hospital.

Unable to find the exact bus route, or a cab or auto for hire, he had to walk the whole way. It was now totally dark. All he had for company was the lorry headlights—which would start in the distance like a pair of tiny dots, and then pass by with a glare and a blare—and the breeze rustling in unseen trees. A slow drizzle started, and gradually became heavier.

For the first time in many years, he felt the urge to pray. There in the middle of the street, he knelt, crossed himself and whispered: "Amen."

Then he continued on.

When he reached the unlit compound of J. J. Mental Hospital, it was well past ten. The watchman and the policeman at the gate refused to let him in. Not even the money he waved under their noses charmed them.

Frustrated, he walked around the dark walls, looking for a way in, when he felt something brush against his back.

"Mr. Paul, will you come with me please?" whispered a voice behind him.

Whipping around, he saw a beautiful young woman in a pink chiffon sari. Her long, silky hair swirled around her face.

"Who are you?"

"You want to meet Benjamin, don't you? Then come with me."

"But... How did you know?"

"I just know. Let me help you..."

He realized he was following her, involuntarily. He tried to stop his feet, but couldn't.

Suddenly she turned back, stretched out her arms and gasped, "Come take me, my lover..."

He felt himself surrendering his body into her arms. She tightened her hug...

Thrown hard against the ambulance parked behind the hospital, Paul Alexander's body fell to the ground in a pool of blood.

"Hello, may I speak to the police commissioner please?"

"Who is speaking?"

"Dr. Jayakumar."

He could hear the click as the call was transferred, and then MacZee's hard voice. "Yes?"

Jayakumar briefed him about the latest developments and said, "I'm not sure if this is murder or a suicide..."

6

"Good morning. J. J. Hospital."

"Can I speak to Dr. Jayakumar please?"

"Who is calling?"

"I am his wife."

"One minute madam, let me check if the doctor is in his room. Please wait on the line."

"Thank you."

After a second she heard Jayakumar's voice. "Yes?"

Devasena was in a panic. "I can't understand what's going on. Someone's dumped a pile of garbage at our front gate. And not some tiny heap that I can get the servant or gardener to clean up—this is like a couple of lorry loads. It's stinking up the whole neighborhood! The people next door are calling me up and yelling, threatening to go to the police. I'm scared. Who could have done this? It wasn't there last night. How could it just suddenly appear? And you, you haven't come home in six days..."

Jayakumar listened to the barrage and then patiently replied, "Devasena, don't be childish. What do you expect me to do? If the neighbors complain, tell them it's just as horrible for you as it is for them. *You're* not the idiot who dumped all the garbage in the street... You're not

one of those intellectual types with a vermicompost pit in your garden. Stop being childish. You should know better than to just call me up and weep, Devasena. You know how tight my schedule is. You know it's not that I'm avoiding coming home. There's just no way I can leave and help out right now. I'm sure you can handle it. All I can do is give a call to the city corporation. You take it from there. Listen, I have to go, bye…"

"No please, don't hang up! It's not just the garbage. Last night, the bed Suresh and I were sleeping on suddenly started to shake. Violently. At first, I thought I was imagining it. But I'm telling you the truth—the cot actually leapt several inches off the ground. I woke up the gardener and called him in—he saw it himself. He thinks someone's put a hex on our house. I was so scared… I tried calling you, but couldn't get through. So I decided we would move to the puja room and sleep there. When I touched Suresh, he was burning with a high fever. He was absolutely fine in the evening; how did he get so sick all of a sudden? I got a pediatrician's number from the directory and called him for a house visit—Dr. Srinivasan. Do you know him?"

"Where does he practice?"

"In Royapettah, next to Hotel Ajanta… He checked Suresh and told me that the thermometer was showing a normal temperature, but his body was boiling. He gave some medicine and offered to have a senior doctor check him in the morning."

"Who is the senior?'

"Do you really expect to me to remember to ask all that, in the state I've been in? I went to see the doctor off, and when I came back Suresh was ice cold. He wouldn't open his eyes. Listen, I don't care about the house, I don't care about your work, all I care about is my son. Now get over here and take care of him…"

But what could Jayakumar do? After two mysterious deaths within the premises, the police were not allowing anyone to leave the hospital. His every move was being watched. How could he make his wife understand?

"Devasena, I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier. There have been two unexplained deaths in the hospital."

"What? Who?"

"You know one of them: Benjamin..."

"Oh my God! And the other?"

"Someone called Paul Alexander—a friend of Benjamin's, or so the police say. We're all under suspicion. The police have even told the patients' wards they can't leave. You understand, don't you? There's just no way I can come. If you're really scared, ask your dad to come over tonight. I will speak to Dr. Srinivasan and tell him to attend on Suresh tonight too. Please, Devasena. Bear with me just this once." Knowing that if he spoke to her any longer, there would be nothing that could stop him from abandoning his responsibilities and rushing back to her and his son, he slowly replaced the receiver.

But now it was impossible to concentrate on his work. As a doctor he knew it wasn't unusual for a child to fall sick for no apparent reason. But how could a thermometer record a normal temperature for a patient obviously burning with fever? And where had the huge pile of garbage come from?

Shanthi's mother should have arrived by now. She hadn't. He had tried calling her home, but no one was answering.

Who is this Paul Alexander? Why did he have to die here, in my hospital? What is Paul Alexander's connection to Benjamin, and was that why he was killed? Or was he the one who murdered Benjamin? The police are saying they found a lot of money in his pocket, and a diary with the hospital address. Why was he carrying so much cash? Will the police allow Shanthi to be discharged? Before the day is done, if there's even one more mishap... will it mean the end of my hospital?

Jayakumar could not think any further than that. He felt a deep connection to each and every brick of the hospital, and to all the staff and patients in it. If he had been woken up at midnight, blindfolded, and told to find his way to this building, he would have had no trouble. In fact, he could have given a grand tour of the interior and identified every object. J. J. Hospital and Dr. Jayakumar were like two parts of a single being.

Silently, he whispered, "Oh God, please guide me out of this. I can't bear it anymore."

His musical wristwatch informed him that it was half past eight. He lit a cigarette. He had lost count of the number of cigarettes he had smoked in the last few hours. His tongue felt wooden, yet he could not stop.

As he stepped out of his room, the intercom buzzed.

"Yes, Sheila?"

"Shanthi's mother is arriving by the late night flight."

"Who gave you this information?"

"Someone called Kailasanathan..."

"Where did he call from?"

"He didn't say."

"Shouldn't you have asked? Anyway... I'm off to the airport."

When he set off, he felt as though the entire staff was silently warning him to be on his guard. And he would be! He informed the police and got their O.K. He checked that there was gas in the car and air in the tires, and that the clutch and brakes were working. He sharpened his ears and eyes as he never had before. He drove so fastidiously that the speedometer needle never crossed forty.

He reached the airport entry gate to find an unusually large crowd gathered there, making it impossible for him to enter. There were fire engines, firemen with metal helmets, policemen, and airport officials working busily. A thick cloud of black smoke rose into the sky from beyond the airport building.

Jayakumar parked his car on the road and ran in.

"What happened?" he asked.

"The flight arriving at half past ten caught fire while landing. The flames are raging out of control. They say no one could be saved..."

"My God, Shanthi's mother...!"

Roughly shoving his way through the crowd, he tried to enter the main building. But the police pushed him back.

Panicked relatives were stampeding in a confused frenzy; there was weeping, sobbing, anxious wailing; water was gushing out of humongous pipes against the dark swirling smoke and tongues of flame; the ground was soaking wet; people were running helter-skelter, not knowing who to ask for help...

Jayakumar pulled himself together. Losing his nerve now was not going solve anything. So many supernatural events had occurred that he was not questioning them any more. There was nothing to do but wait.

He moved to a corner and lit a cigarette. Then another. Then a third. He had almost finished the pack when…

"Hello, Doctor," said a voice.

There stood Kalpana Mahadevan, Shanthi's mother—tired and dismayed, but otherwise unhurt.

They hardly spoke as Jayakumar walked her back to the car and drove her to her hotel. The crash landing, the fire… nothing even seemed to matter. Finally, Jayakumar dropped her off and headed back to the hospital.

7

Midnight.

The telephone jingled very softly. But it was enough to startle Jayakumar. Lately, even if a door was shut too hard it would scare the daylights out of him—him, the city's most famous psychiatrist! He answered the phone. It was a desperate Devasena sobbing at the other end.

"Please, please! Come home right away! Suresh is having fits. His upper eyelids have retracted, his eyes aren't focusing and he's frothing at the mouth. You have to save my baby…!"

Jayakumar dropped the receiver and rushed out, not noticing the police inspector or Sheba, the nurse. His mind was full of Suresh… Suresh… Suresh…

He thought about the first time he bent down to the cradle, in the air-conditioned ward, to look at his son. Those tiny curled palms, and the eyes, just dark slits…

"Devasena, have you thought of a name yet?"

"How about Muthu Kumar?"

"Muthu Kumar!? Couldn't you think of a more stylish name?"

"What do you mean? Muthu Kumar is my grandfather's name."

Finally she had held a grand ceremony, with colourful balloons above the cradle, and decided on the name Suresh Kumar.

A vision flashed, of baby Suresh toddling up to him; baby Suresh giving him a kiss.

"Who does baby Suresh like more; Amma or Appa?"

"Amma and *Appa!"*

That cherubic mouth, now frothing? Those tiny limbs, having an epileptic seizure?

Jayakumar stepped hard on the accelerator and did not let up till he had made it to Poes Garden from Poonamallee in just twenty minutes. He entered the house exhausted. But when he heard Devasena's wails from inside, he collapsed on the steps, tears streaming down his cheek.

Two days later, Suresh hung on the drawing room wall as a framed, garlanded, blown-up colour photograph.

"Appa… tell me a story."

"What story would you like me to tell?"

"The crow story… crow story!"

"Once upon a time there was a crow. Tell me, what sound does a crow make?"

"Caw, caw…"

"And a sparrow?"

"Cuckoo…"

"How about our Jimmy?"

"Woof woof!"

It was all confined to memory now. That voice would never be heard again except on family tape recordings. The voice that had once echoed through the living room, bedroom, dining room and kitchen—the voice that now brought buckets and buckets of tears from everyone's eyes.

Devasena, my dear, dear wife, I used to chase you from bus stand to bus stand. I learned to love you even more on Marina Beach, under the tree in Guindy Park, and in dark, cool cinema halls. I married you, after you went through the ritual of looking up at the star Arundhathi, and stepping on a grinding stone—both of us behind thick rose garlands, wearing artificial

smiles and shaking hands with anonymous guests. And in my embrace, in the bedroom, you melted…

Dear wife, you have not eaten anything for the last two days, nor slept a wink. Your eyes red with despair, your face swollen with unshed tears…

Jayakumar had no words to comfort her.

"Devasena… please get up."

"Suresh… my dear child…"

He gently caressed her back. "Come and eat. You haven't eaten for two days."

"I want my Suresh."

"You should eat now."

"No! Let him come to me hug me, kiss me, call me 'Amma'. I'll come after that. I'll do anything you want."

As Jayakumar stared helplessly at the sobbing Devasena, the telephone screamed.

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"This is Shanthi's mother, Mrs. Mahadevan speaking."

"Yes, tell me."

"I'm sorry to hear the news."

"Please, can we talk about something else?"

"Okay. Can you recommend me a good advocate? I need to record my will."

"Is there a problem?"

"I have a feeling that I'll be leaving in the next couple of days."

"Leaving where?"

"Leaving this world."

"What?"

"I mean it, Doctor. I'm not joking. It's like there's a little voice whispering in my ear that my time is almost up. Before that happens I want you to know a few things. I realize this isn't the best time to ask you. But I don't have much time on my hands either. Could you come down to Hotel Chola for half an hour? Please?"

"Fine. Is this a private matter, or can I bring my wife along?"

"Of course, bring her!"

"I'll see you in the lounge in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Putting down the receiver, he returned to try to console with Devasena.

"Please... You've been crying non-stop for two days. It's not going to bring our child back. If some higher power has intended this fate, there's nothing we can do to fight it. Please, Devasena... if you continue like this, I'll have to admit you in the hospital."

"Please do. In fact just help me die. Then I can join my son forever."

"Don't be stupid," he snapped. "If you are trying to punish me, then go ahead. Drive *me* mad, for all I care."

This brought Devasena to attention at once. She rushed into the toilet, washed her face, combed her hair, changed her clothes and stood in front of Jayakumar in a flash and announced, "Let's go!"

He hugged her tight, close to his heart, and said softly into her ear, "I'm sorry Devasena... really, really sorry."

In the car he asked, "Can we go to Hotel Chola?"

"As you please." He studiously ignored the weary tone and drove.

In the lobby, Kalpana Mahadevan was prominently visible. Short hair, lightly painted lips, a sleeveless blouse, a voluptuous figure—she was very attractive for her age.

"Hello, meet my wife Devasena," Jayakumar said. "Devasena, this is Mrs. Mahadevan, the mother of a patient of mine."

They moved to the restaurant, took their seats, and placed their orders.

"Doctor, have you brought the advocate along?" asked Kalpana.

"He'll be here in ten minutes. I called him before I left."

Kalpana Mahadevan stared into space for a few moments.

"I saw Vijay Bani this morning," she said, mysteriously. "I'd gone to Burma Bazaar to buy some foreign shampoo for Shanthi. Luckily, I didn't get out of the car, so he didn't see me. If he had, he would have finished me off then and there."

Seeing her face ashen and her voice and hands tremble in fear, Jayakumar asked curiously, "Who is Vijay Bani?"

8

The darkness could have stained a hand that touched it. There was not even a spot of light. He could not shake the feeling of being followed. Perhaps it was just his imagination! Mahadevan looked back fearfully. There was no one. The dry leaves rustled loudly beneath his feet. His heart palpitated even faster, adding to the terror. The only protection he had amidst these supernatural, abstract powers was the metal sheet the swami had given him. The swami had beaten out the copper plate himself, etched the magic lines on it with a golden nail, and meditated on a special *yagna* for three days without eating even a grain of rice or sleeping a wink—all in order to make this protective shield for Mahadevan. His hand moved to check the plate in his coat pocket. His mental resolve seemed to double instantly. Still, the dark, faceless trees and the cold wind refused to allow him to relax totally.

A lone rooster crowed, off-time, from nowhere. He paused for a moment, wondering if he was heading mindlessly into danger. But this had to be done. The old swami would never be able to make this trek on his own. He was too frail to withstand any physical attack—and definitely not in pitch blackness. What was more, there was no reason for him to risk so much to save a friend's child. This was Mahadevan's onus. There was no time to approach the police. Even right in the beginning it had been a waste of time answering their questions. He had to save the child on his own.

A sharp thorn pierced the sole of his shoe. Balancing on the other foot, he tried to remove it, but his hands were shaking. Gritting his teeth, he attempted to control the trembling, and managed to get it out. He stood up straight again and jumped up and down a couple of times, trying to revive his nerves. He took out the .35 American pistol from his coat pocket and checked that it was loaded. All six chambers were full. With his forefinger ready on the trigger, he looked around cautiously. Just then he felt a sharp flick on the back of his head. Flustered, he looked to the right, left, and behind.

There was no one. In his panic, he had dropped the pistol. Down on his haunches, he silently felt among the dry leaves and found it. Rising,

he glanced around again, not exactly sure what he was looking for, when again something slapped the top of his head. The pain travelled swiftly down his body...

He was fast losing his vision. Mahadevan knew it was just a physical reaction to his state of fear, but had no way to control it. He bent down, took out the silencer from his sock and fitted it to the pistol. There was another slap on his neck, sharper this time, and he fell forward to the ground.

Squinting through the darkness, he glimpsed a gray form disappearing in the distance.

"You will be dead on the twenty-fifth of next month!"

Not only Mahadevan, but the whole audience—the judge, the advocates, the police, and Kalpana—were shaken by the declaration. Vijay Bani was actually making a direct threat to Mahadevan's life, openly, in a court of law! The prosecutor insisted that this be recorded in the judge's statement.

And yet all the arguments the police had so far put forward against Bani were to be shot down by Bani's lawyer Sakarapani.

"Your name?" Sakarapani asked, once Mahadevan had taken the stand.

"Mahadevan."

"Occupation?"

"I have an estate that I manage on my own."

"How long have you known the accused, Vijay Bani?"

"I met him for the first time when I went in search of Meena."

"How did you know that you would find Meena with this complete stranger?"

"It was revealed to me by my swami, whom I worship as God."

"And how did he know?"

"He has divine powers. He can tell you everything, about the past, present and the future."

"What is his name?"

"Sridharan Nambiyar."

"And would your swami be able to tell what I will be doing at ten tomorrow morning? What my bank balance is? What I'm going to dream about tomorrow night?"

"Of course!"

"Fabulous! If he is so powerful, can he gift Tamil Nadu a good shower tomorrow? We could do with some rain. Are you trying to joke with me? Let me tell the court what *actually* happened. You kidnapped your friend's child. Then you lost your nerve, fearing the police. Poor Bani became a victim of your cowardice. He caught you alone, so you beat him up and told the police that you rescued the child from him."

"No!"

"I'm willing to accept that you did not know Bani before this incident. But then how did you know where to find him?"

"I already told you. The swami told me."

"Suppose I accept that. Then why did you wait fifteen days after Meena's disappearance to set off on your search? You're well educated; did it not occur to you to approach the police before you went to your swami? You could have taken the police along when you went on your hunt. Why did you choose to go alone?"

The lawyer's voice was dripping with contempt. Mahadevan was at a loss. He hadn't realized how the legal system worked; if he had known he would have to face this cross-examination, he would have prepared himself to answer these questions. After he had set off in search of Bani, rescued Meena, and fainted in the police station, he had thought it was over. He had never expected that a lawyer by the name of Sakarapani would be tearing him to pieces in Bani's defense.

Thankfully, the court called for a recess.

Mahadevan spent the break consulting his lawyer. He made notes and gave a copy to the public prosecutor. When he faced the defense lawyer the second time, there was no hesitation in his response. He went on the counter-attack.

"Mr. Sakarapani, let's say we are best of friends, and one evening I am hurt in a road accident and suffer brain damage. What would you do as a friend?"

"Um… rush you to the closest hospital."

"It's not as simple as that. If you did take me to a hospital, they wouldn't treat me right away, since it would be a police case. The police themselves would riddle you with a thousand questions. But as my friend, you would not be thinking of any of those things. Your only thought would be to save my life.

"That was exactly my state of mind when I approached Bani alone. Also, this involved the occult. I had no idea how the police would react. I did go to them, after rescuing Meena, to have Bani arrested. I swear, I've done none of the other things you accuse me of."

Mahadevan's reasoned argument had a good effect on the judge. But since the police were unable to substantiate all their charges with enough evidence, Vijay Bani was sentenced to just seven years of rigorous imprisonment in Coimbatore Central Prison.

Mahadevan had believed that was the end of it, and had stopped worrying about Vijay Bani.

Bani, though, did not forget Mahadevan. He had set up a tiny empire within the prison. He cured the wardens' tensions. He excited the fellow prisoners with tricks like making *vibhuti* from nothing. The inmates were convinced of his divine powers and that he was a true sorcerer.

"He was meditating for years in Thiruvannamalai," said a few. "No no, he has come straight down from the Himalayas," said others. "It's just bad luck that's landed him in the prison." His influence within the prison grew without bound. Taking advantage of the other inmates' fearful awe, he procured flour and a piece of black cloth. He fashioned a doll with the flour, in the image of Mahadevan. He whispered the name "Mahadevan" in its ears, three times. One morning, before dawn, when the rest of the inmates were still asleep, he lit a fire with dung cakes, added drops of cactus milk, chanted softly, covered the doll with the black cloth and pressed hard on its stomach....

Mahadevan rolled out of his bed to the ground, in pain. It felt as if someone had extended a demonic hand into his stomach and was squeezing it. He screamed and writhed, hanging onto Kalpana's hand and weeping like a baby. She didn't know how to help him, had no idea who to approach for aid in the dead of the night. She called up every

doctor in the directory and fed her husband every medicine that they suggested. Finally, he fell asleep.

Bani was becoming an expert in his cabalistic skills. He knew that his voodoo had begun to work. He waited for the night of the twenty-fourth. On that night, he did not sleep. Instead, he went into deep meditation. At five in the morning, he dashed the doll's head on the prison wall and crushed it…

Mahadevan was in the bathroom when the floor suddenly seemed to slip out from under him. His feet shot into the air and he fell to the side. His head bashed into the small tiles between the Western toilet and the sink, taking the full force of his body weight. He crashed to the floor, never to wake again.

At first, the court and the police ignored the allegations that Bani was responsible for Mahadevan's death. Finally the intervention of the commissioner was sought and Bani's cell was thoroughly inspected. They found the doll in the black shirt with the crushed head. Yet no case could be filed against Bani on these grounds.

Jayakumar and Devasena sat stunned, trying to digest the unbelievable story they had just heard.

"Why did you suddenly ask for a lawyer?" he asked Kalpana.

"I have my reasons. A few months ago Vijay Bani spotted Shanthi and me in Ooty. He came up to us and said, 'You remember what happened to Mahadevan? The police couldn't even lift a little finger against me. Your husband spoiled all my plans. I will not rest until I ruin his whole family. In ten days, I'll be sending Bannerjee to your house. Look out!' Exactly ten days later, Shanthi became unbalanced. I'm scared he's going to get to me soon, too…"

Kalpana wiped her tears and got up to go to the toilet. Just then the fan right above where she had been sitting broke loose and crashed into her chair with a loud bang. For a second time, Kalpana Mahadevan's face was painted with the fear of death.

9

"Is it fair?"

The other end remained silent.

"Tell me, is it fair? The news has been leaked to the assembly that you covered up those two murders. How am I to explain your actions? They're accusing me of accepting bribes! The press is questioning everything. I cooperated with you because I knew how much stress you were under. I don't care who you arrest on suspicion. But make a start. Understand?"

Joseph MacZee disconnected the call. His eyes were red from lack of sleep. The innumerable cigarettes and coffees had made his mouth bitter. He thought back on the errors the police had made in the case so far.

The FIR was unacceptable. If they released it, they would be ridiculed by the press.

Shanthi was yet to be removed from the hospital.

Speculation and rumour about the case was spreading like wildfire. That had to be checked.

They must make certain there were no further murders in the hospital.

How was he to proceed?

The first concern was Shanthi. The flame that flickered in her eyes; the strange transformation of the pencil into a stiletto; the extraordinary strength in her body that made it impossible for even a hundred men to budge her from where she sat or stood—it was all extremely puzzling. How was a young girl capable of such power? Who would be able to find a solution? Who could help both her and him?

In a flash, he thought of Father Murphy. He knew that Murphy was an extraordinary man. He had seen him whip up a frenzied call of "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" from thousands of believers at once; had seen him heal disabled people so they could walk again, restore hearing to the deaf, all through the grace of Jesus Christ. How he managed these miracles, no one knew. Joseph MacZee had not been able to make any rational sense of it either.

That pair of eyes, brimming with peace and compassion, lent a strange kind of strength to anyone who met them. MacZee trusted Murphy implicitly. Perhaps the father could help in Shanthi's case.

Ten minutes later, MacZee's white Ambassador sped through Kotturpuram, breaking all traffic rules, and drove in through the cathedral gates. Inside he could hear Father Murphy on the microphone, expounding on the teachings of Christ. A strong, passionate voice! MacZee waited for the sermon to end and then met the father in his private chambers. He told him everything about Shanthi, including his own doubts and apprehensions.

"I am helpless now, Father."

"Do not worry, my son. I shall pray for you, and I shall give you some holy water. Sprinkle some on her face. Wait and watch the Satanic demon within her flee in fear."

Joseph MacZee entered J. J. Hospital with the bottle of holy water.

Shanthi sat in the centre of the bed, in lotus position, motionless, staring at MacZee. He felt two rays of light piercing into his eyes. A shiver ran through his body. He managed to stand strong, not displaying his uneasiness. Shanthi began to speak.

"Mr. MacZee, please come closer. I need to speak to you," she said in bass, male voice.

"Speak," he said hesitantly.

"Mr. Commissioner, I demand respect. I am not a constable working under you. You shall refer to me as Mr. Bannerjee." There was anger, sarcasm and authority in that voice. It was unmistakable.

"Fine, Miss Shanthi," said MacZee, with a wry grin.

"I'd advise you not to play games with me, Commissioner. You have no idea who I am, so you are trying to play with danger. You try your games, then wait for my turn. I doubt if you will even withstand it. You will go mad, resign your job and run away."

The commissioner stayed silent.

"Good, you are speechless. If you comply by staying quiet and listening to what I have to say, I shall cooperate. I'll even give you the list of

those that are waiting for their turn to die. Maybe, if you are humble enough, I will even tell you how to save yourself."

Unable to bear the insult any longer, he brought out the bottle of holy water from behind his back and splashed it over Shanthi. Water dripping from her hair and face, Shanthi got up from the bed and roared out with thundering laughter, loud enough to make the whole hospital quake.

"So Commissioner, relying on Hollywood for your answers, are you? You seem to have learned something about sprinkling holy water! Ha! *Gutter* water is more like it. Who gave it to you? Perhaps you caught some of the father's pee? Dey! These tricks will have no effect on me! Go tell that to the old man in the white habit who lent you his piss. Bastard, I shall tear you in two and bathe this room with your blood. Are you playing with me? Come here! Dey, come da! Where are you running to now, huh? Rascal! Ha, ha, ha…!"

Joseph MacZee was not going to wait for the lift. He took the stairs down. In his haste he slipped and felt a sharp sting on his back. "Jesus!" he whispered, and increased his speed. He did not stop till he reached the reception area. He leaned against the counter and felt in his pocket for his cigarettes. He could see his hand shivering as it held up the lighter. Guessing his anxious state, Sheila fetched a cup of coffee for him from the canteen.

"Thank you… thank you, very much!"

Putting down the empty cup on the table, he smoked the cigarette down to the filter tip.

His normally rational, scientific mind could not comprehend what was happening. He was becoming more and more convinced about mystic science. Suddenly he remembered Shankar Ram and Namasivayam telling him about the planchette board, and mentioning the name Sridharan Nambiyar. This was not Shanthi who had spoken to him just now, he was sure; it was Bannerjee speaking from within her…

If you comply by staying quiet and listening to what I have to say, I shall cooperate. I'll even give you the list of those that are waiting for their turn to die.

"No!" he whispered to himself. "I have to prevent any more loss of life. It is my duty. I don't care whose help I have to take for this. If that

means believing in the occult, so be it." He crushed his cigarette in the ashtray and rushed out of the building.

In the parking lot, he asked the driver to get out, and started the jeep himself. But as he turned into the main road, one of the jeep's tyres popped off, and the rear axle began dragging along the road. He lost control. The jeep skidded, leaping into the air like a white frog on the dark tar road for about twenty meters, and came to a halt on its own.

Joseph MacZee opened the door and got out, with not a single scratch on him, but completely shaken. Unmindful of the busy traffic, he knelt there on the road, crossed himself and said softly, "Our Father, who art in heaven... for ever and ever. AMEN!"

10

The police jeep running off course for no apparent reason made Joseph MacZee truly scared for his life. A weird dread settled in his heart. Not wanting to waste any more precious time, he picked up the wireless. It was only after trying for ten whole minutes that he was able to get hold of Shankar Ram.

"Shankar Ram, will you come here immediately please?"

"Yes sir."

In a short while Shankar Ram arrived and offered a smart salute. Informing him about the jeep, MacZee asked, "What do you make of this, Shankar Ram?"

"Perhaps the axle was already faulty."

"Nonsense. This is a brand new jeep. It was delivered just two days back. You can check with Hussein. He's the one who placed the four lemons under the wheels and squashed them to ward off the evil eye, and then drove the jeep to the station. How could the axle have been faulty?"

"I'm sorry sir. I didn't know the details."

"I don't think you know much of anything about this case."

"I have to agree with you there. The whole thing is very mysterious."

"Quite true! We have to be extra careful. It is imperative that you stay inside that hospital at all times. I will pay a visit to Sridhar Nambi."

"Sridharan Nambiyar?"

"Yes man… the name that was spelled out on the planchette board. Where does he stay?'

"I can't believe I'm hearing you say this."

"What else can I do? It's my last resort. Even if I dismiss everything else as coincidence, I can't refuse to believe what just happened to my jeep. Let's aim a stone in Nambi's direction and hope we knock the ripe mango from the tree. Tell me the address."

"Ponnagaram, beyond Tambaram… and sir, if you don't mind… will you do something for me?"

"Yes?"

"I shall teach you a small incantation. Say it eleven times before you set off."

"You're kidding."

"*Aiyyo*, sir… This is a very powerful incantation, to be used only for success in a mission."

"Fine, tell it."

"*Innahu min Sulaimaan!*"

MacZee was surprised. "What's your name again?" he asked.

"Shankar Ram, sir."

"Aren't you a Brahmin?"

"Yes, my sacred thread is intact beneath my uniform, sir."

"And what religion do I belong to?"

"Christianity."

"Then what do you mean by this? Either I should say a Christian prayer, or you should teach me a Hindu mantra. Why should we be saying an Islamic chant?"

"It was taught to me by an old Muslim man. It is very powerful; I am sure of it."

"If you'd only remembered to start chanting it when we first took up this case, maybe we wouldn't have had such a big problem!" MacZee laughed, gave Shankar Ram a friendly pat on his shoulder and got on the Bullet. Thrilled, Shankar Ram began chanting "*Innahu min Sulaimaan!*" By the time he had chanted it eight times, the Bullet had turned the corner.

At the spot where the tarred road forked there was a yellow board, on which black lettering announced the boundary of Ponnagaram District. A dusty red sand track led into the town. It wasn't difficult to find Sridharan Nambiyar's residence; it was a tiny thatch structure in a remote corner of the town. MacZee approached noiselessly. Just as he touched the bell rope, the door opened a little and a young man with ruffled hair peeked out.

"Are you police commissioner MacZee?"

MacZee nodded, dumbfounded.

"Please come in."

He entered a long, dark corridor that opened out into a triangular room lit by a dim *kuthuvillaku*. On a coir cot sat an old man with a long beard. He was wrapped in a black blanket.

"Come in Thambi," he said in a husky voice. "Please sit down. Why do you keep standing?"

MacZee sat down on the chair that the young man drew up for him, cleared his throat and said, "I'm here for an important…"

"You are Police Commissioner Joseph MacZee. Since you have not been able to find a single clue about the two recent murders, you have come to me. You also want to know about a ghost; the ghost of Bannerjee, which has possessed the body of a young woman. Am I right?"

Joseph MacZee was too stupefied to answer. He merely nodded.

"One of your junior officers got my name and address from the ghost that appeared on his planchette board. Yes?"

For the first time in his life, MacZee began to believe firmly in the supernatural. His stern policeman's ego dissolved, and he submitted his will to the swami's power.

"How do you know all this?" he asked timidly.

"I know more. Do you really want to learn about it?"

"Yes."

"Will you be able to bear the consequences?"

"Yes."

"First, answer my questions. What is your name?"

"Joseph MacZee. Didn't you just…"

"Do not interrupt me. I need only your answers. If you accept that, stay seated. Otherwise, you may leave."

MacZee was silent.

"Good! There will be a day when your life in this world will come to an end, correct? So after you are dead, your body will be there in your home. Your friends and relatives will be standing around it, weeping. What will they call it when you are taken to be buried?"

"Um… preparations are being made to bury the body?"

"Exactly. *The body*. Then this name, Joseph MacZee… is it the name of your body, or something else? When you are dead, do people say they are burying Joseph MacZee, or burying your body? "

"Ah. Interesting point."

"Let's say you catch a criminal and get him sentenced to three years imprisonment. After two years, he manages to escape from prison. When you catch him again, what kind of punishment should he get?"

"An even harsher one! Escaping from prison is a crime."

"Similarly, every human has so many years allotted, that have to be lived in this world. So those who meet accidental death through murder or suicide linger on in the world without a physical body. God does not give them an alternate body. Only by God's grace can they be reborn, even as a worm. Those born as humans who die a tragic death will still linger as spirits, retaining human qualities, dreams, and longings. They then possess the bodies of weak-willed people to fulfill these longings. That is what Bannerjee is doing, right now, through Shanthi. But the problem is complicated. Bannerjee did not *voluntarily* enter Shanthi's body. A *shaitan* named Vijay Bani has directed him into her, and used him to murder Benjamin, his former apprentice, who was challenging him for power."

"You mention both shaitans and spirits. What is the difference?"

"A child born to a woman of wicked mind at dawn on the sixth of June can become a shaitan—a phenomenon known in your religion as 666. Their existence is part of God's design. Only if good and evil exist together will the world continue to turn. It is the mountains that define the valleys. Those born on 666 are destined to commit every sin imagin-

able, even in their youth. Salvation is never in their thoughts. Of course, it is by their own actions that they are brought to ruin—not by God.

"For example, suppose I buy you a radio. I can only buy it for you; you are the one who has to decide which station to play. Similarly, God's job is only to create us humans. We determine our own thoughts and actions."

Suddenly, Joseph MacZee felt extremely tired. "This 666 business sounds like something out of an English movie. How can we actually believe it?"

"You don't believe me? Fine. Will you do something for me?"

"Sure!"

"About half a mile away there is a cemetery. At the right end of it is the tombstone of a man named Francis. Will you please go check it and come back?"

This time, MacZee did not argue. He rose, prostrated himself at the old man's feet, went out and kicked his Bullet alive.

Mrs. Kalpana Mahadevan sat motionless, her face drained, her sleepless eyes steeped with sorrow. Dr. Jayakumar and Devasena forgot their loss for a moment and tried to comfort her, at least to try to lessen some of her fear and sadness.

"Mrs. Mahadevan, tell me why I'm holding this cigarette?" said Jayakumar.

Not understanding why he was suddenly asking such a thing, Kalpana replied softly, "I don't know. Perhaps to forget your own grief?"

"Chee, chee! It's because if I don't hold it, it'll fall down."

This poor attempt to get a smile out of her failed completely. Jayakumar and Devasena glanced at each other, and stood up.

"May we leave, Mrs. Mahadevan?"

"Oh, but the lawyer is not here yet."

"He'll meet you here soon."

"What did you say his name was?"

"Parasuraman."

11

Parasuraman, the lawyer, arrived with the typed will. Kalpana signed blindly wherever he pointed. Half the day was spent on paperwork. Tired, she tried to nap, but was disturbed by nightmares of Shanthi being chased by Vijay Bani. Startled, she woke up.

"Oh God, why do you do this to me?"

Hadn't she been a good wife? Hadn't she always gone to sleep after he had, and rise before him? Hadn't she helped several poor children get an education? Wasn't she running an orphanage? Hadn't she hiked up her sari and rushed in to help people suffering from a flood, or a draught? Why was she being punished unnecessarily?

She felt her stomach clench. She rushed to the washbasin and threw up bitter bile. Then she stood in the shower, her sari still on, and had a long bath. Silver needles of water crashed over her skin, and gradually she calmed down.

When she came out of the bathroom, Kalpana was composed. Her fear and confusion had vanished. Cheerfully she hummed a Hindi film song as she changed into dry clothes and dried her wet hair. Gazing in the mirror, she saw herself still brimming with youth, even at forty-two. Had Mahadevan still been alive, he would not have been able to resist her as she looked right now. He would have crept up silently behind her and hugged her tight. Tears gathered in her eyes at the thought. The telephone saved her from further distress.

Kalpana picked up the receiver.

"Hello, this is Devasena. I'm coming there now to take you somewhere special. Be ready!"

"Where?"

"You'll know soon."

When Devasena came over, a serene Kalpana welcomed her. Careful not to upset her again, Devasena spoke in a soft, kind voice.

"Where you waiting for me, or you were headed elsewhere?"

"Where would I go, Devasena? I'm too scared to stay in the room alone. Do you think I would dare to venture out? Where did you want to take me?"

"There's an astrologer in Egmore—on Kongu Reddy Street—who's very good at solving problems involving magic. I thought we could go to him for advice. What do you say?"

"Well, I've already tried everything else," said Kalpana, "and nothing's helped. Why not try one more thing? Let's go."

In Egmore, they sat down in lotus position and offered a plate laden with fruits and money to the astrologer. He merely picked a lemon from it. Suddenly he lifted his head and gazed at Kalpana with sadness. After a moment he spoke.

"I am truly sorry for you. Your stars are not cooperative. You must be extremely careful. I shall pray, and give you an enchanted lemon. Keep it on your person, always. Even while at home, hold it in your hand or tuck it in at your waist. It will help ward off any danger. You will be blessed by Devi Durga Parameswari. Please stop worrying and hope for the best."

When Kalpana put out her hand, he dropped the fruit from slightly above, so as not to touch her. The lemon fell into her palm, slipped and rolled to the ground. He shut his eyes and whispered, "Devi!" and meditated for a while, then told Kalpana, "When you receive something, put out both your hands."

"Swami, I'm terrified. Am I in danger?"

"Place your trust in Devi, and go with a strong mind."

She prostrated at his feet and rose. She started to say something, but he held up a palm to silence her.

"I shall speak to you later, Thayi. Not now."

The women left without another word. They did not speak until they reached Devasena's house.

"Kalpana, should you return to your hotel?" asked Devasena. "Why don't you stay with us?"

"Okay, but I have to go there to get my luggage and clear my bills. I'll come in an hour."

"Would you like me to come along?"

"Don't bother. I'll handle it on my own. Also, isn't it time for your husband to come home?"

Kalpana took a taxi to the hotel. When she entered her room, there was an unbearable stench, like the smell of burning flesh. She called

housekeeping to clean up, placed the lemon on the table, and had just walked into the bathroom… when it happened.

The metal Godrej bureau in her bedroom was slowly creeping towards her. Sensing the movement, she whipped around in terror and rushed towards the lemon. The huge teak bed swung out to obstruct her path.

She sank to the floor.

"Please, someone save me!" she tried to scream, but the words refused to be spoken. Wearily she hugged her knees, buried her face and wept. The next second, the metal bureau fell forwards, without a sound.

Blood gushed out onto the floor as she was squashed to death.

The cemetery was dark. It was difficult to spot the entry gate. Taking out his tiny pen torch, MacZee leapt over the low compound wall. His heart struggled to beat, and he was having trouble breathing. His limbs were trembling. With the thin ray of light, he read the names on the tombstones: John, Peter, Curie, Elizabeth, Vincent, Miranda, Constantine, Arokya Mary… Finally he came upon the one he had been searching for: John Francis Xavier. Born: 1923, June 6, 6 A.M. Died: 1977, June 6, 6 A.M.

MacZee stared, every hair on his body standing on end. Suddenly a trickle of blood began to flow from a crack in the stone tomb. He rubbed his eyes. How could fresh blood come out of a tomb built in 1977? He kicked the tomb slab, hard. It shifted. With his Swiss knife, he tried to pry it off. The rough granite cut deep into his fingers. A dog's howl from nowhere made the brave commissioner shiver. Using all his strength, he lifted the slab. The next moment…

A blast of electric current hit his cheek and he was thrown back four feet. Rubbing his cheek, he looked around to see what had hit him. To quell the physical and mental tremor, he stood up and shook himself. He took a deep breath and peered into the grave. Inside was just a skeleton, the flesh having long since been eaten away. He reached in to pick up the skull, and a tiny bone slipped from it and fell back into the pit. He examined the rest of the skull. There seemed to be something written

on top— but just then, his pen torch switched off, and he was unable to read it.

He lit a matchstick. Etched into the top of the skull were the numbers 666. Remembering Nambiyar's words, he felt a chill in his heart. He heard another howl, closer this time. He struck another matchstick. What he saw froze his blood.

Inside the grave, in the place where the skeleton had been, was a man, bleeding from a stab wound, struggling to take his last breath.

Was he hallucinating? Or was this a real person?

He squatted and reached into the grave to help, when something invisible struck him in the chest. Even before he could rise, he was hit again, now in the stomach. And again, in the ribs…

Clearly, this was not the moment for bravado. His life was in danger. Quickly he evaded the next blow and took to his heels. Running blindly, he crashed into something—and heard a human voice curse into his ears. "Bastard!"

MacZee gathered his breath and tried to leap over the short compound wall. He tripped, but luckily made it out of the cemetery and fell on the roadside. Without slowing, he rolled forward, then got up and kicked his Bullet alive.

Loyal to its employer, the vehicle responded to the command at once. MacZee did not stop until he reached Nambiyar's hut. He parked the bike. He was thirsty, afraid; his heart was palpitating, his body was drenched with sweat. Doubts, anger and anxiety were all warring in him at the same time. He approached the old man… and then suddenly the ground slid under his feet, and he fell unconscious.

Shankar Ram had waited for MacZee's taillights to fade in the distance, and then proceeded to look for the missing tyre. He saw one lying in the bushes on the roadside, and walked to it. It was indeed the jeep's tyre, but there was no apparent damage. Then how did it come loose? He had no explanation. He rolled the tyre back to the jeep and used the wireless to call the hospital and check on Shanthi. Everything seemed to be fine. He fixed the spare tyre onto the jeep.

Lighting a cigarette, he felt his eyes getting heavy. He had not slept for four nights. He took a few drags and threw away the cigarette, got into the back seat, and lay down. Ten minutes later he was in a vivid dream. Shanthi was running in slow motion, in Eastman colour, on green grassy slopes.

She came up to him, took his hands and whispered huskily, "Shankar Ram, do you want to come to the waterfall with me?"

"I'll come anywhere you call me, Shanthi."

At the waterfall, she said, "Let's see you dive," and shoved him from behind into the frothing cascade. He sank into the foaming water, choking, battling for his life...

"Sir... sir..." Someone was shaking him by the shoulder.

He woke up startled. Shanthi, the waterfall and the swirling currents swallowing him had all disappeared. All he could see was a vague form, slightly out of focus. Gradually it became clearer.

Who was this? He looked familiar.

The man said, "I've come walking all the way from Ponnagaram. I had an accident and broke my leg, but I could not find any transport. Please help me, sir."

Incredulous, Shankar Ram looked at the man's leg. The right knee was indeed badly wounded. There were streams of blood running down to his foot.

Without hesitation, he told the man to get into the jeep, and started it. The feeling that he had seen the man before nagged at Shankar Ram as he pressed down on the accelerator. That face! He was sure he had seen it before this week, and up close. But where?

Just as he was nearing J. J. Hospital, a pair of bright headlights bore down on them. Trying to evade a collision, Shankar Ram swerved to the left, drove onto the mud pavement, and then pulled back onto the road. Then he turned to check if his passenger had been hurt any further. But there was no one.

His heart leapt up into his mouth. The man couldn't possibly have jumped out of the jeep while he maneuvered to avoid an accident. Where had he gone?

And then it hit him. Of course! This was the second victim, the one who had been thrown against the parked ambulance!

How could a dead man come back to life?

Had his feet been planted on the ground?

Why had he pretended to be hurt?

Was Shankar Ram the next target?

He broke out in a sweat.

He came to a sudden halt and whispered, "*Innahu min Sulaimaan... Innahu min Sulaimaan...*"

As he chanted this for the third time, he heard a voice near his ears.

"Proceed. I am with you."

Shankar Ram felt a shiver. It was the voice of the old Muslim who had taught him the incantation. If it was possible to hear that voice, then wasn't everything else also possible? The lorry which had just almost crashed into him... Paul Alexander coming back from the dead to ride in the jeep with him... Shanthi murdering Dr. Benjamin with a pencil...

The wireless came to life, and he started the jeep. It was a call for him to rush to the hospital.

As he entered the compound, his driver waved him frantically to a stop.

"Where were you, sir?"

"What happened?"

"Look at my forehead, sir," he said, pointing. There was a black spot on it. "I tried washing it off, but it would not go. Where did it come from?"

Shankar Ram touched the spot. It was strange. He had known the driver, Pachaiyappan, for over five years. He had never seen anything like this. Pachaiyappan broke into loud sobs. "Sir, the hospital staff is saying that anyone who gets this spot is doomed to die soon. I'm scared, sir. I'm a family man. I have five children. Do something, sir. Save me!"

Shankar Ram could think of nothing to do to comfort him, this grown man now wailing like a baby, except put his arm around his shoulder and pat him.

"What's all this, man? Stop crying like a woman. Stop worrying. No matter who calls out to you, don't move from my side. Or if you have to,

then call out to everyone you see, loudly, by their name. Stick with me until it's time to go home."

Pachaiyappan obeyed, following Shankar Ram like a shadow.

Around seven in the evening, Shankar Ram walked towards the men's toilet to relieve himself. The driverless ambulance parked on the sloping ramp suddenly hurtled towards him at great speed...

Pachaiyappan stood watching Shankar Ram, his back to the ambulance.

In a flash, alerted by some sixth sense, Shankar Ram spun around, rushed back with the agility of a trained stunt actor, shoved Pachaiyappan out of the path of the ambulance, and rolled with him onto the lawn.

When they got up, the black spot had disappeared from Pachaiyappan's forehead. Instead, there was now a black spot on Shankar Ram's forehead. Pachaiyappan stared at it, horrified.

Ignoring him, Shankar Ram turned and walked purposefully towards Shanthi's room.

12

Vijay Bani was born on the Konkan seashore, but had grown up in Kerala. And it seemed that traces of that soil, the soil he rolled and played in as a child, still clung to him.

During his youth, he ran street shows with a fighting snake and a mongoose.

The world refused him any dignity, made him beg for every meal. It ignored his existence, crushed him underfoot. But later he would turn on the world—with a vengeance.

He learned every trick there was. He began to study black magic. He learned how to beckon spirits, then how to order them to do small favours, and finally how to enslave them and make them obey his every command.

At the culmination of one such effort to enslave a spirit, Mahadevan had interfered. So Bani had finished him off. Once Bani got out of prison, he was determined to eliminate every member of Mahadevan's family

from the earth. His rage had now grown so large that he wanted to do away with everyone who had ever had anything to do with Mahadevan at all.

The police department could never point their fingers at him. They were still clueless, running helter-skelter. Well, they had made him suffer for seven years in prison, hadn't they? They deserved it!

It was not material wealth he was after. It was *siddhi*—the eight powers. He had attained all but one of them, and to attain the last, he had to sacrifice many lives. He was now using Bannerjee's spirit as his agent. Unless he wanted another prison term, he could not do it himself. Already, seven years had gone to waste.

Just the thought of Mahadevan made him gnash his teeth. He quickened his stride. He had to go to Ponnagaram to get Francis's blood. It didn't matter if it was dried; it was the only thing that could soothe his parched throat... Ah, he needed it. *Francis, where are you?*

Having chanted complex prayers, stripped a woman naked, seated her on a magical yantra across from him, and meditated for two days and two nights, Bani's throat was raw. Mere water would not quench this thirst. It had to be blood—the blood of someone born at six in the morning on the sixth of June. He had searched high and low through the city for someone who fit the requirement, and finally learned of Francis.

He jumped over the small compound wall at the southern end of the cemetery, and walked purposefully through the dense trees towards Francis's grave. A dog howled. Seeing a figure near the grave, Bani hesitated. Pressing his forefinger to his navel, he called on Bannerjee's spirit.

"Who is inspecting Francis's grave?"

"The police commissioner MacZee."

"What is he doing here?"

"Someone has sent him—someone even more powerful than you or I. I tried to extract the information from his mind, but my powers were blocked. All I could learn was this: he is here to investigate Shanthi's case, and the deaths of Benjamin and Paul Alexander. He does not know yet about Jayakumar's son, or Shanthi's mother."

"What is he doing now?"

"He saw Francis's skeleton change to a living body, writhing in pain. He must have found that a bit strange. Now he is examining the grave."

"Go and have a game with him."

Bannerjee's invisible form teleported over to MacZee, kicked him in the chest and ribs, pushed him to the ground, and returned to Bani.

"Chase him away," said Bani. "I have some urgent work with Francis."

"I shall do so."

Bannerjee went back to MacZee and hounded him till he dropped the skull, leapt over the wall and fled on his bike.

Bannerjee returned once again. "My lord," he said humbly, "you know that I am, myself, well trained in the occult."

"So?"

"Do you think it is right to send an expert like me on such measly tasks?"

"What?" Bani's eyes blazed with anger and his face turned red. He tore at his flesh with his nails till he bled, then with his bloody nails wrote the name *Bannerjee* on the ground, and stomped on it with his foot.

"Please don't," begged Bannerjee. "Forgive me. Do not torture me. I am suffering enough."

But Bani's rage had not yet abated. "Off with you, slave! Don't you know why I asked you only to chase MacZee away, and not to kill him?"

"No, my lord!"

"Idiot! You yourself just told me he was sent here by someone more powerful than us. By tomorrow, you must find out who that is. After that you can do away with MacZee."

"Yes, my lord," replied Bannerjee, meekly. Only then did Bani remove his foot from the name.

Bani approached Francis's grave. He took a fistful of mud, chanted a prayer, and flung the mud into the wind.

Suddenly a strong wind arose—a huge, ferocious gale. Trees swung back and forth. Smaller trees and shrubs were uprooted and flung high into the air. It began to pour in torrents.

Bani stood at the grave, not budging an inch, his eyes shut, soaking in the storm, as if the sudden squall had nothing to do with him. His lips kept chanting.

One... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten... ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... Jayakumar continued to pace, as he had been doing for the past ten days. He was not able to think clearly. He came out to the living room, where Devasena was sitting staring into space.

"Devasena, I'm going out for a while," he said. "Don't expect me home for lunch." The sorrow painted on her face wrenched his heart. He moved swiftly to hug her tightly. She had been waiting for this; she buried her face in his broad chest and broke into sobs. He fought back his own tears, gently let go of her, and left the house.

Devasena knew her husband down to the tips of his fingernails. She was sure he was on his way to a liquor bar. Whisky was the only resort when confronted with impossible sadness. But would whisky be enough to drown this loss? She bit her lower lip.

She heard a sound from the bathroom. The shower was on. Who could be there?

Fearfully, she went to the bathroom. She was too scared to push the door open. Thinking for a moment, she switched on her tape deck and pressed record. The sound of the shower continued. She switched off the tape, rewound it and played it back. The sound of the shower was recorded. So she wasn't imagining it; there was someone in the shower. She pressed record again, and called out, "Who's there?"

"It's me, Bannerjee. I badly needed a shower, but I didn't want to disturb you. So I got in through the rear window."

"Bannerjee? Who are you?"

"Don't you remember me, Devasena? I'm your friend."

Bewildered, she looked around. She saw the framed photograph of Suresh on the wall. Suddenly the image of her dead son disappeared, and dissolved into her father-in-law, Krishnasami.

"Devasena... do not speak with that Bannerjee," the picture said. "He is not a good person. He is a restless ghost. He is here to kill you. Go into the puja room, light the lamp and sit there till I call for you. Go!"

But Devasena did not seem to hear him. Instead she walked up to the photo and asked, "Maama, are you here alone? Wait, let me get you some coffee. Why don't you read the paper until I get it. After that you can have a shower, and then I'll make lunch. I'll call your son over, too. I'll make all your favorite dishes. But Maama, why didn't you bring Athai also?" she said breathlessly.

The bathroom door opened, followed by Bannerjee's voice.

"Devasena, do you have a thick rope? Capable of bearing forty or fifty kilos?"

"Sure! Hang on; let me fetch it for you."

Krishnasami whispered from the photo frame, "No. Don't listen to him. Listen to me. Go to the puja room."

"Devasena, did you hear what I said?" came Bannerjee's commanding voice.

Devasena obeyed. "He wants a rope, Maama. Please wait until I can get it for him."

The tape recorder was still recording.

"Here is your rope."

"Please sling the rope over the fan, and make a noose."

"Devasena, don't. Please go to the puja room. Run!"

Devasena ignored her father-in-law's voice. She slung the rope over the fan, made a noose and then climbed onto a stool underneath it...

"Kick the stool out from under your feet," commanded Bannerjee's voice.

"No!" begged Krishnasami, from the photo frame. "Don't do it!"

As soon as Devasena kicked the stool out from under her, the thick nylon rope tightened, her limbs twitched, and her eyeballs bulged out.

"Maama, please save me..." she pleaded silently.

But his face disappeared from the photo. There was no more Krishnasami, only the sad face of Suresh.

"Please Mr. Bannerjee, save me."

There was no Bannerjee around, either.

The next moment, the noose tightened around her throat, her limbs twitched, and the life slowly left her body.

As cold water splashed on his face, Joseph MacZee regained consciousness. The heaviness seemed to be lifted from his eyelids, and he opened them.

"Where am I? Whose house is this? What happened?"

He could see the glow of the kuthuvillaku and the figure of Sridharan Nambiyar, a shawl draped over his shoulders. Nambiyar's young assistant was still crouched over MacZee, dousing him with water.

"That will do, thanks," whispered MacZee. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow.

"My son, you look tired already," said Nambiyar. "How are you going to confront what is to come?"

"It's true, Swami; I am tired. I've never before encountered this many inexplicable events. Could you please tell me what's going on?"

"I shall, MacZee.

"The sixth of June... I don't know the year, but I'm sure the digits will add up six. Born on such a cursed date, and lacking even a shred of conscience, Bannerjee committed many sins. He sacrificed young children to gain supernatural power. He enslaved several restless spirits and made them do his bidding. But after his death, he was unable to regain a physical body, and so those spirits are tormenting him now. He is in the control of your adversary, Vijay Bani. Bani does not understand that after his own death, he too will become a restless spirit like Bannerjee."

"I think I'm starting to understand. Still..."

"Don't interrupt. Supernatural powers can be attained by anyone. All it takes is practice and concentration. Then you can bring the five elements under your control; you can shatter a mountain to smithereens with just an intense look. But to be that powerful, you should also be

absolutely pure. If you still don't believe me, MacZee... lift up your hand."

He did. But he could not hold it up too long; the heat was too fierce.

Again Nambiyar told him to hold up his hand. This time, it became so cold that he went numb.

"That will do, Swami. I believe you."

Nambiyar give a thin smile.

"MacZee, all the wonders of the universe are contained here on this earth, nowhere else. The power is in your heart. Meditate and you will realize this truth yourself. You may leave; it is time for my puja."

Nambiyar rose. MacZee left the hut and kicked his Bullet alive.

As he approached Poonamallee, he thought he saw someone running across the road just in front of him. He pressed the brake, lost control, and skidded. Just then he heard a voice next to his ear.

"Joseph MacZee, turn left."

He did so... and collided with a truck turning in from the opposite direction. MacZee was thrown over ten feet into the air, and landed hard on the ground.

A half hour passed. He was dimly aware that the truck that had run him down had disappeared.

Bastard!

He felt like someone had tried to stuff the entire universe into his head. He could not move.

I can see my life leaving my body. I'm moving towards death. I must tell Shankar Ram about Bani. I must prevent Shanthi from taking any more lives. Not for me, not for my family, but for this uniform that I wear so proudly...

He could hear the wireless on his bike beeping feebly.

He put his weight on his left foot and shifted his body forward. He felt around with his left hand. He got hold of a thorny root. With all his remaining strength, he tried to pull himself up from the ground. The thorns bore into his palms, making him bleed. He tried again, but to no avail. He could see his bike lying on its side a short distance away. Slowly,

he crawled on his knees towards it. Finally, with a groan of triumph, he reached the wireless.

"Hello, Control Room? This is an urgent call."

"Yes sir?"

"This is Commissioner MacZee. Get me Shankar Ram at once, wherever he is."

"Yes, sir."

MacZee could hear several voices in the background. He waited patiently. His eyelids were being pulled down. He tried swallowing and taking a fresh breath.

"Sir, this is Shankar Ram… what is it? Where are you? Sir?"

MacZee took another gulp. "Shankar, listen. Don't interrupt. I'm going to die. Go to Sridharan Namibiyar, at once. Only he can save Shanthi and prevent more deaths. Do this for me…" His body trembled for the final time and then went still.

"Sir… sir…"

There was no reply.

Shankar Ram ground his teeth. How was he to tether Shanthi?

In the rectangle of the rearview mirror, the tarred road was slipping away at a tremendous speed. The wind was almost strong enough to blow Shankar Ram out of the seat of the open jeep.

His foot had the accelerator pushed to the floor. The occasional trucks and cars coming from the opposite direction gave him a wide berth. On the mud path to Ponnagaram, he could see a howling ambulance, police jeeps, and a crowd of people milling about. He knew they were all there for MacZee's lifeless body. He didn't want to see it. He continued at the same speed and did not stop till he reached Nambiyar's tiny ashram.

"I need to see Sridharan Nambiyar. Now!"

"I'm sorry. He's resting. Come back in the morning."

Shankar Ram pushed the young man aside and entered the room. In the glow of the kuthuvillaku, he could see Sridharan Nambiyar meditating. He sat in front of him and silently chanted, "Nambiyar, please open your eyes… Nambiyar, please open your eyes."

His telepathic communication had the intended effect. Nambiyar opened his eyes and casually said, "So, tell me, Shankar Ram."

Shankar Ram did not reply right away. He only gazed at Namibiyar. Then suddenly he burst out, "Save us! Please!"

POLICE COMMISSIONER DEAD IN ROAD ACCIDENT! screamed the headlines of the posters for all the dailies, hanging at the sides of the roadside petty shops, as the smokers, betel-leaf chewers, and tea drinkers arrived for their morning fixes.

Sridharan Nambiyar finished his bath. Still wearing his wet *veshti*, and with his hair damp, he sat in front of the kuthuvillaku again. Shankar Ram was flopped against the wall, watching. Nambiyar's young disciple handed Shankar Ram four palm leaves, and instructed him to hold them above the floor. The disciple went out again and came back with banana leaves, *poha*, sugar crystals, and jaggery.

Nambiyar stepped outside, gazed at the glaring sun, returned, sat in padmasana in front of the kuthuvillaku, and said a chant while clapping his hands. Magically, vibhuti fell from his empty palms. The disciple spread sand in front of the square *homam* where the camphor was burning, and scribbled something there in a strange language. He then threw the palm leaves onto the sand; they immediately stood upright, on their stalks. Dung cakes and ghee were added to the flame. Nambiyar's grey tresses glistened in the glow.

Nambiyar placed a green leaf on the flame, which caught fire at once and burned down to its veins. Now there were figures visible on the leaf. They gradually dissolved into real faces. Shankar Ram rose to take a clearer look.

There was someone riding a speeding motorbike. It was Commissioner Joseph MacZee, who should have been going at a steady pace on the Tambaram Main Road. Instead, he was driving recklessly, as if controlled by some external force, unable to see the truck bearing down on him or to hear its blaring horn—then his bike slid under the chassis, and MacZee was flung metres away.

Shankar Ram shut his eyes in horror. When he opened them again, he saw MacZee's blood-soaked body.

"Oh sir…" he whispered.

Nambiyar disregarded Shankar Ram and concentrated on the burning leaf. Now the image of MacZee dissolved and Shanthi took his place, sobbing: "Save me… please!"

Almost at once, Bannerjee took possession of her, and she spoke in a harsher tone, "Dey, you old grandpa! Are you trying to trap me there with your leaf? Release me at once! Or I will destroy both you and your disciple! If you want to continue living… let me go, you scum!"

Nambiyar continued to stare into the leaf. Bannerjee exploded with rage.

"How dare all of you club together and torment me? As if Vijay Bani isn't enough! How dare you join in too? Let me go!"

The old swami put a hand to his head and plucked out a strand of hair. He knotted it around the wrist of the Shanthi that appeared in the leaf. The next moment, the leaf went up in a flare and burnt to ashes. Then, he broke eight eggs over the sand bed. The yolks vanished before they hit the sand, and the words the disciple had scribbled there vanished too.

Nambiyar placed both wrists on the ground beside his knees, pressed them into the ground, shut his eyes and roared.

14

"My benevolent friends who reside in realm of the spirits, I call one of you to aid me in the task I have before me…"

Sridharan Nambiyar's voice stopped for a moment. He hands grasped at something invisible in midair. He held on to it, rose to his feet, and hugged it tight.

"Thank you my friend. I am grateful to you. Advise me on what should be done."

Shankar Ram was too surprised to comment. Nambiyar ignored his presence and continued to speak to empty space.

"Please tell me what I can do with my humble body."

An invisible voice said, "I am not so very powerful. Your deeds just now have appeased my soul. You are much greater in knowledge than me.

I shall lead Vijay Bani into a bit of a confusion and bring him over. You know what to do with him. In any case, you have neutralized Bannerjee through Shanthi. There can be no more mishaps."

Shankar Ram was dumbstruck.

Vijay Bani was still standing. He took out a small urn. In it was the ash remains of the skull of the eldest child of some family. He mixed Francis's blood into it. Smearing the paste on his forehead, he began to walk out of cemetery. The rain was now poring down in sheets.

He heard a whisper near his ear. "Bani!"

He looked around cautiously.

"Sridharan Nambiyar is headed here from the east, to do away with you. If he gets to you, you are done for. So run!"

He took to his heels. The voice continued to chant, "Run! Run! Run!" he realized it was not Bannerjee's voice. Who was this, helping him out?

"Who are you?" he asked, loud.

"Who, you ask? Your dad!"

Bani felt a harsh blow on his nape. He stumbled and fell on his face. Flustered, he got up and continued to run. Seeing a house not too far away, he ran towards it in hope of refuge.

Inside, in the glow of a kuthuvillaku, he felt his two feet become leaden, refusing to move further. Something nailed him to the wall. It was difficult to tear away. His jaws locked.

Sridharan Nambiyar came close to him and gave him a hard knock with his fist. Bani's front teeth came loose.

Nambiyar gave a tiny smile. "You errant child, how could I ever let you go? You would be the ruin of this entire world. How many, many lives you've taken, all for your own selfish ends! Is it fair? How many spirits you've enslaved... Now *they* will have their turn with *you*. Wait and watch!"

"Aiyyo, please, don't! I'll never do it again. Please let me go!"

"I'm not going to kill you. That's not even my job. Neither will Shankar Ram, the inspector here, lay a hand on you; for he has no material proof

against you. But since I took your front tooth, you will no longer be able to pronounce your spells clearly. You base is uprooted. You are now an ordinary, useless man. At least now, you should learn to toil with your muscles. Run!"

His face contorted, and Vijay Bani dragged himself out.

An untold joy enveloped Shankar Ram. He thought back on everything that had happened. It seemed like something from a novel—but it was all too real. Bani, the mastermind behind all the murders, had now been rendered impotent. All the misadventures had come to an end. Jayakumar had to be informed. Shankar Ram hastened to the hospital.

But for some reason the hospital was cheerless. As he climbed the steps to Shanthi's room, he was accosted by Nurse Stella.

"Inspector, the doctor wants you to come to his house immediately."

He turned back hurriedly, without a second thought. What could have happened now?

Dr. Jayakumar welcomed Shankar Ram emotionlessly, asked him to sit, and poured himself another drink. The whisky bottle in front of him was half empty. His eyes were steeped in sorrow. There seemed to be no one else in the house.

"How about a peg?" he asked Shankar Ram.

"No thanks."

"Please have a drink. It will strengthen your heart."

"My heart is strong already."

"Is that right? Step into the next room and take a look. Then tell me if it still feels strong."

Shankar Ram rushed to the bedroom adjoining the living room… and froze.

From the nylon rope hung Devasena.

It had happened again… Oh God!

Shankar Ram arranged for the postmortem and the cremation, and then returned to the hospital.

It was unnaturally quiet.

Shankar Ram did not wait for the lift or bother to speak to anyone. He went up to Shanthi's room and knocked. It did not open. Instead a voice asked from inside, "Who's that?"

"It's me, Inspector Shankar Ram."

"What do you want?"

"Open the door. I need to speak to you."

After a moment, the door opened. Shanthi stood with eyes wide open, fearful. The sight of her was enough to send Shankar Ram into a deranged frenzy. He forgot that it was a spirit that had resided within her; that it was Bani who had used her like a puppet. In his rage, he blamed her for everything. He took out his revolver.

"Are you satisfied now?" he demanded. "Dr. Jayakumar and I are the only ones left alive, besides Joseph MacZee's wife and child. Of course, there is the staff of this hospital. Why don't you take out all the rest of us, once and for all?"

Scared, Shanthi moved backward, till she came to the wall. Crumpling against it, she said, "I don't understand what you're saying."

"You don't? Only because you were admitted in this hospital, you took the lives of Jayakumar's wife and son. The poor commissioner tried to save you, but you finished him off too. Even your own mother...! What kind of a woman are you? Chee!"

"Mr. Shankar Ram, I honestly don't get what you are saying. What happened to my mother? Please tell me..."

Her tears only frustrated him further. He threw his pistol at her feet.

"That's fully loaded. Aim the first at me, the second at Jayakumar. The other four, you can do what you wish. May you live happy and alone."

Gradually the realization began to dawn on her. It was true. She had committed many murders. Not voluntarily; she had not been in control of her body—she had not even been in control of her mind. Nevertheless, so many people had died by her hand. Who would ever believe her innocence?

Will I ever find any peace? How can I escape this guilt? I cannot... It will shadow me for the rest of my life!

In a flash, she picked up the revolver, pointed it at her forehead, and pulled the trigger.

Before Shankar Ram could jump forward to stop her, the shot echoed through the hospital corridor and Shanthi slid to the floor, her nightdress splattered with blood.

"Oh God!" groaned Shankar Ram.

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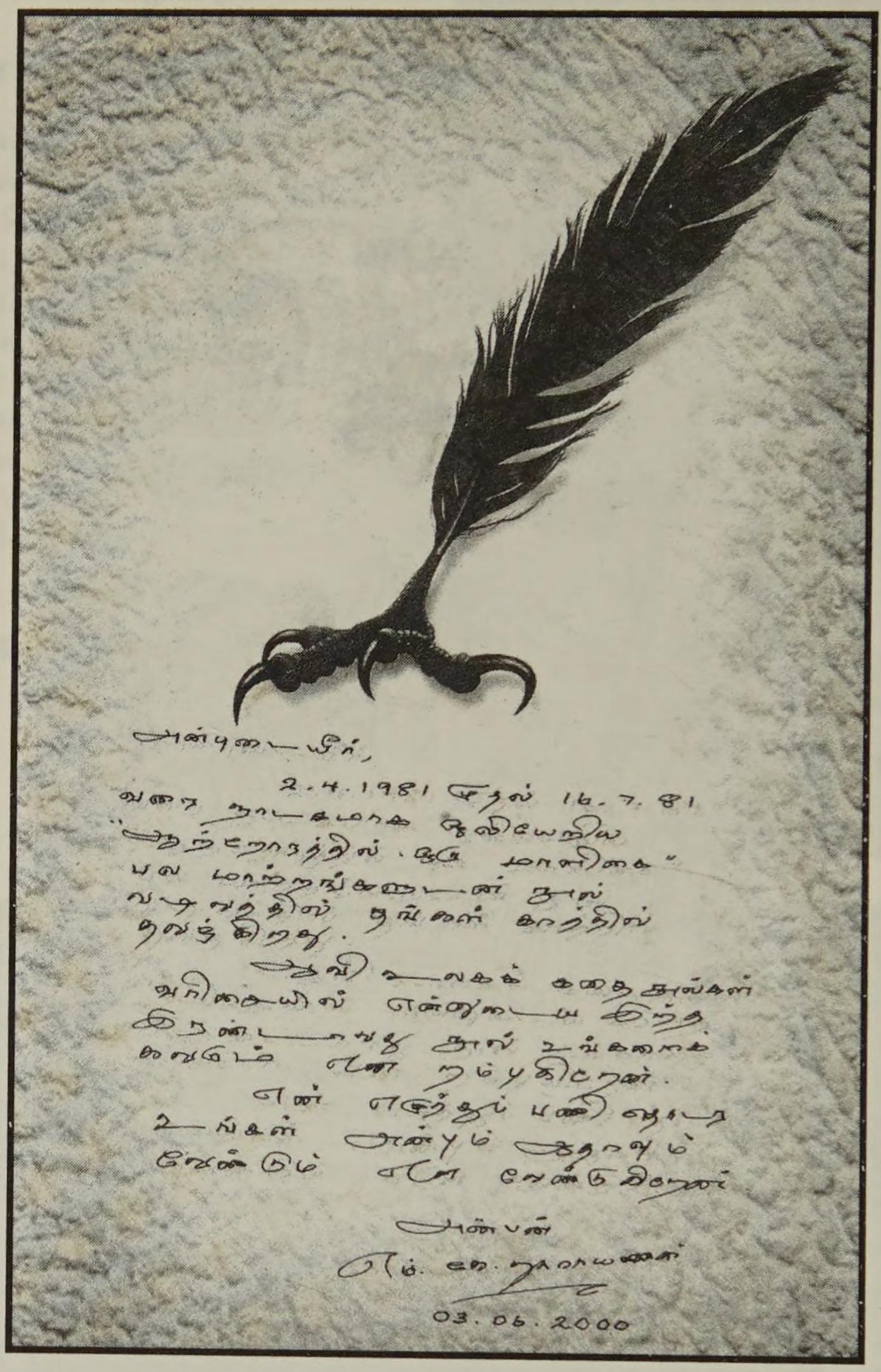
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This page and opposite: Ads from 1972 weekly magazines



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Dear Ones,

The radio serial that you all loved to listen to, *The Bungalow by the River*, broadcast from April 2 to July 16 1981, is now ready and here in your hands—with just a few changes.

I'm sure you'll enjoy my next venture into ghost story writing as well.

I request you to extend your love and support for me to continue with my writing.

Yours,

M. K. Narayanan

June 3, 2000

M. K. NARAYANAN

Many people—even many Indians—are unaware that Tamil is one of the four officially recognized languages of Singapore.

Tamil pulp fiction from Singapore and Malaysia has a history dating all the way back to 1932, when the daily paper *Tamil Nesan* serialized a detective novel by K. Parthasarathy. In more modern times, horror writing has become especially popular, in keeping with a trend common to many languages throughout Southeast Asia.

M. K. Narayanan, however, originally made his mark not in fiction but in radio. He joined the then Radio Television Singapore as a broadcaster in 1964, rising through the ranks to head *Olikkalanjiam*, the Tamil section, from 1981 to 1994. He wrote and produced numerous radio programs, the most famous of which was *Marma Medhai* (Mystery Theatre). His serialized radio version of the epic *Mahabharatham* was also extremely popular with Singapore's Tamil community.

M. K. Narayanan lives in Singapore with his wife, his son Ganapathy and his family.

THE BUNGALOW BY THE RIVER

ஆற்றோரத்தில் ஒரு மாலிகை (2000)

1

October 30, 1940

THE STORM RAGED, with heavy gales of wind. It was midnight.

The car came to a halt. Six-year-old Manivanan hugged his mother in fear. She clutched him to her chest.

Angappan stumbled out of the car, walking drunkenly ahead of the driver.

"Aiya, can I go?" asked the driver hesitantly, waiting for further instructions. But his *aiya* only stood there, silently swaying.

"I shall be here tomorrow," the driver said, and left.

Angappan entered the house. He looked at Maragadham holding his son to her chest. She stared back at him.

"What the hell are you looking at me like that for?"

Maragadham gave no reply, but continued to glare.

"Di… you slut! I asked you a question. What the hell are you looking at me like that for?"

Still standing on the stairway, Maragadham brought Manivanan down to her waist. "What did you just call me?" she snapped. "A slut, am I?" She barged down the steps. "You go running after every whore in this town, and now you dare to call *me* a slut?"

Maragadham, who had until this day been the perfect embodiment of patience, was now blistering with indignation.

Angappan had not expected this change in her behaviour. For just a second, he was flummoxed—but then he gathered himself. And Maragadham knew what was coming next.

He would slap her, drag her by the hair, throw her to ground, and then kick her around. Then poor Manivanan would begin to howl.

She put her son down and advanced to stand by the sofa. The child stared up at his parents, trembling with fear.

"Maragadham!" shouted Angappan, catching her by her long hair and pulling her towards him.

She swung around and scratched Angappan's cheek with her sharp nails.

"*Aaa!*" he screamed in pain, his hand still raised to slap her. But Maragadham gave him a hard shove. He tripped on a chair and fell to the floor.

"I've made a decision," she said. "I won't let you whack me or my son around like animals any longer. You can live happily ever after in this house with your whore. Come, Mani, we're leaving!"

Angappan sat up. His head was throbbing—*vinnn*, *vinnn*, *vinnn*. He touched his hand to his wounded cheek. A fresh wave of anger washed over him. He wanted to crush Maragadham to a pulp. But this was not the same Maragadham he was used to, the one who cringed and wept when he was in a temper; this was someone else entirely.

Where did she find the guts to fight back? he wondered.

"Yes, get out of my house," he snarled. "You have the nerve to raise your hand against me, and you think I'll let you stay?"

Maragadham picked up a travel bag, slung it over her shoulder, and turned to him. "I won't wait for you to throw me out. You told us several times that we were as good as dead to you. Now I say to you: as far my son and I are concerned, you no longer exist," she announced, and walked out with Manivanan.

It was pouring. At the front door, she opened an umbrella, held Manivanan to her chest, and walked into the rain. She paused at the gate for a second and gazed for the last time at the bungalow she had called home. The front door was still wide open, and Angappan stood there glowering at them.

She drove the car to a tiny Mariamman temple a kilometre away. It was well past midnight. She thought they could spend the night under the temple's tin roof. But the howling wind was freezing. Dripping wet, she walked with her son to a hut next to the temple, in which Karuppayya the priest and his wife Anjalai lived.

She wondered if she should wake them up at this late hour. But Manivanan was shivering in the cold. Maragadham knelt at the door of the hut and said a silent prayer to Mariamman.

Thayi, Mariamma, I have laid all my trust at your feet and stepped out of my home with my son. From now on, you must guide us!

"Who is that?"

She rose. It was Karuppayya at his door.

"It's me, Maragadham."

"What are you doing here so late?" he asked, disturbed. Anjalai peeked out from behind him. Inside the hut, a hurricane lamp was lit.

Manivanan had fallen asleep. Maragadham came in, changed out of her wet sari and into an old one of Anjalai's, then proceeded to explain to them why she had left home.

"So you're sure you don't want to go back to your husband?" asked Karuppayya.

As a priest, he was well aware of what transpired in so many homes. He had observed countless women enduring this sort of treatment with

great patience, and the hope that one day Mariamman would solve their problems. Of every ten women who came to the temple, eight were abused by alcoholic husbands. And of these eight, at least three could be expected to eventually opt out of their relationships and start afresh with different men.

But Maragadham was a shrine of virtue. For years, she had remained in that hell her husband had made for her, bound by tradition. That was what had prompted Karuppayya to ask the question.

"No," replied Maragadham. "He won't hesitate to bring that whore Mangalam to the house. I want to raise my son with my values, and not have him tainted by that debauchery. That is all I care about anymore."

Karuppayya and Anjalai looked at Maragadham in amazement; it seemed she had finally managed to break away from the shackles of tradition.

"You are welcome to stay here."

"No, thank you," Maragadham said. "I won't remain here on this estate. There are several other estates. I'll take Mani and move far away. But could you please pass the word around and help me find a job on some other estate?"

This woman is the wife of a man who owns a huge estate, and now she wants to be a labourer... Anjalai was moved to tears. Karuppayya was speechless.

"When I was only ten, I lost my father when a tree fell on him during a storm," Maragadham went on. "He died on the spot. When my mother saw his crushed body, she had a heart attack. After that, I was raised by my grandfather. He taught me how to take care of myself from a young age. I can bear any pain. I have faith that Mariamman will guide me to the right path."

Karuppayya sat up. "Of course she will. There are four or five rubber estates in Singapore. Just a few days ago, an agent arrived here looking for coolies to employ. I know of several families that have decided to move there. One of the couples I know very well—Ramalingam and his wife. You could go with them to Singapore."

"Yes, I'll go," Maragadham agreed, with no hesitation.

2

August 10, 1962

The call came unexpectedly, after twenty-two years, and took Manivanan completely by surprise.

"Thambi," said the caller, "my name is Kaliyaperumal. I was your father's lawyer when you were very young. I have important news for you, but I cannot give you all the details on the telephone. I would like to meet you in person, preferably with your own advocate."

Manivanan vaguely remembered meeting Kaliyaperumal, his father Angappan's friend, when he was barely five years old. He also remembered his mother telling him that Kaliyaperumal had broken off the friendship with his father a long time ago. Because the old man had made an effort to call him all the way from Seramban, Manivanan agreed to meet him, and gave him the address of his own advocate, Kadiravan, as well.

Kala stood by her husband, keenly watching him as he spoke to Kaliyaperumal on the telephone. Once he was done with the call, she asked, "Did my uncle give him our number?"

"Yes," replied Manivanan, "but he didn't say how he got your uncle's number. Whatever I asked, he kept saying, 'Wait till I meet you in person.' Must be something to do with my dad."

He walked into the puja room, where among the pictures of the gods was one of his late mother, Maragadham. His thoughts raced to the past.

Kala stood at the entrance of the puja room. She could gauge her husband's state of mind. She, the daughter of Ramalingam, had known Manivanan since they were very young, and she had seen firsthand the struggle that Maragadham had gone through to raise him.

Manivanan turned to her and spoke thoughtfully. "Twenty-two years ago, my mother and I walked away from a man addicted to wine and women, and into a raging storm. I severed all relations with him then. Now Kaliyaperumal is coming to tell me something about this 'father' of mine. I can't make much sense of it; in fact, I don't think I'm very happy about it."

"Listen," suggested Kala, "you often tell me not to make hasty decisions without knowing all the sides of an issue. Let's hear what Kaliyaperumal has to say first. Then make your judgment."

Almost twenty-two years ago, Maragadham had gone to Sembawang, Singapore with Ramalingam's family, as Karuppayya Pandaram had suggested. Manivanan had gone with her. They stayed on the estate where Ramalingam's younger brother Ganapathy worked.

They started a new life in that rubber estate in Sembawang—a life full of trials. Their situation was very close to slavery. There were forty Tamil families on that estate, and five more families from Java. The men were employed to collect sap, and the women to weed the fields. Ramalingam's wife Sitalakshmi was a helpful, pretty woman, who became very fond of Maragadham and called her Akka. The Tamils built a tiny tin shed for their gods Mariamman and Muneeswaran, and worshipped them devoutly. The families supported one another, and Mariamman was their only source of hope.

The meeting took place at Kadiravan's office one week after Kaliyaperumal's call.

Kaliyaperumal, even in his sixties, stood tall and dignified. He held both Manivanan's hands, and tears gathered in his eyes.

"Thambi! Manivanan!" he gasped. "How many years have gone since I saw you? How quickly the time has passed!"

Kadiravan looked at them, silent.

"Is this Ramalingam's daughter, Kala?" Kaliyaperumal inquired, pointing to her.

Manivanan nodded.

"Did my uncle give you our number?" asked Kala. The old man nodded yes.

"Now that we've introduced ourselves formally, why don't we proceed with the meeting?" Kadiravan recommended. "A week ago, Kaliyaperumal got in touch with Manivanan, and then with me, regarding the legal heirship of Manivanan's father's estate. As Manivanan's advocate, I need all the details of the will. I must also know when it

was written and under what circumstances. There is one hitch, though. Manivanan has declared that he wants no share in the wealth of the man who called himself his father. Still, I will have to legally record everything."

"That's why I have come here, to explain all this," said Kaliyaperumal. "Some months back, Angappan came to me to draft his will. He gave me the necessary documents. I shall give you the whole account, as Kadiravan has asked me to."

3

Angappan was born in India, in Manargudi, in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. He was orphaned at a very young age, spent his teens with his maternal uncle, and moved to Chennai as a young man to work in a shop next to the Kapaleeswarar temple. It was around that time that he befriended Kaliyaperumal, who came from a well-to-do family and had a successful career as a lawyer.

When Kaliyaperumal got a job offer to move to Malaysia, he asked his best friend to come along. Kaliyaperumal joined a law firm in Kuala Lumpur, and Angappan started as an office boy in the same firm. Angappan had agreed to make the trip because he believed that Malaysia was some sort of magic land where money grew on trees, and all one had to do was pluck the notes and pocket them. He was, of course, disappointed. Still, he had a strong urge to make it big in life. In this new world, he made new friends, and within a year he managed to open a tiny food stall opposite the train station. After only six months, his food stall had become so popular that, with the help of a friend named Kadar Moideen, he opened three more branches in the city and bought four acres of rubber estate as well.

"Dey Kaliyaperumal, do you see me now?" he bragged. "Remember what I was when I set off on the ship from Chennai? Just look what I've become! When the planet Sukran is in a favourable position, then everything one touches turns to gold. I'm planning to invest in a palm grove in Mata Ikan. Kadar Moideen, my benefactor, has gone back to India, to

his hometown of Nagapattinam. I need a trustworthy person to handle my affairs. Why don't you join as my manager and legal advisor?"

Kaliyaperumal accepted. He visited his native town, Kulithalai, in Tamil Nadu, married his cross-cousin, and returned to take up the new post. The tiny income he had been earning at the law firm had been too small for him to send any money back home or think of starting his own family. Angappan's proposal had come at an opportune moment.

It was on one of Angappan's visits to his rubber estate that he met Maragadham, and fell hard for her beauty. She was an orphan like him, having grown up with her grandfather. She fell in love with Angappan as well. They had a grand wedding; the fact that a labourer's ward had married the estate owner was the talk of the town for many days afterward.

Maragadham begged her grandfather to move in with them in the bungalow. But he turned her down, saying, "I was born a simple labourer, and I choose to die that way as well. I don't want my granddaughter's marriage to boost my own status." He continued to live in the same hut until he died.

Gradually, Angappan's true colours began to show. It is said that having too much money ruins a man's morals, and Angappan did nothing to prove the adage wrong. He began to frequent dinner parties and receptions in star restaurants. Maragadham, having grown up in a poor labourer's home, had dreamt of a simple life after her marriage. She realized that they had to display a few extravagances for the public to respect their position, but she wanted their personal life to remain down-to-earth. She had no desire to spend all her evenings attending lavish banquets, but she was compelled to accompany her husband. Once Manivanan was born, however, she had an excuse to stay home and avoid all the pomp. "You know the child can't bear so much noise," she would say. "It makes him cranky."

Angappan took full advantage of her absence, falling deeper and deeper under the sway of wine and women. Still, though he sampled many sorts of exotic liquor and women of many races, he did not stop loving Maragadham—that is, until he met Mangalam, a danseuse.

During the 1940s, many touring Indian dancers and musicians would come through Malaysia and Singapore. Mangalam was the daughter of

an actor who had played small roles in the Tamil film industry in the 1930s. She was one of several dancers from Tamil Nadu who was invited for a dance function to generate funds for the renovation of a temple in Kuala Lumpur. The association that had organized the event also invited Angappan as the chief guest.

In those days, it was an unwritten rule that the chief guest at this sort of function should make a large donation.

"This is Mangalam," said the organizer, Sivaprakasam, showing photographs to Angappan. "This one here is her mother, a very popular film actor. And these are the other dancers."

When Angappan laid eyes on Mangalam's photo, his heart quaked. But it was in Maragadham's life that the shock waves would be most devastating.

Mangalam's younger brother Paramanayagam was the agent who brought the group of ten dancers from Tamil Nadu to Malaysia. But the dance recital, which was arranged under the auspices of several influential men like Angappan, generated a lot of opposition from the public. As it turned out, however, the evening was not at all appropriate for a temple fundraiser; instead, it was an orgiastic display of gyrating female bodies. There were contentious letters in magazines and newspapers. Sivaprakasam was heartbroken.

But Angappan and his gang were thrilled. The dancers, after performing for the public, gave another performance for the rich men in private. And of all the dancers, it was Mangalam who enchanted Angappan the most.

A week later, Mangalam's mother went back to Chennai with the other dancers, leaving her son and daughter behind.

By then, Angappan did not want to be parted from Mangalam. He had no thought for Maragadham or his son; indeed, he had practically forgotten he was married.

Affairs like this were common in those days. Many wives quietly accepted such situations. But Maragadham was made of sterner stuff. Her refusal to put up with the affair caused frequent fights at home.

Kaliyaperumal, who was not just Angappan's legal advisor and manager but also his best friend, could not bear to see his friend becoming

a sexual slave to Mangalam. But when he tried to talk to him about it, Angappan did not take his advice kindly.

"Kaliyaperumal, this is a personal matter," growled Angappan. "Even the closest friend has no right to interfere."

"Angappan, you have become a captive of wine and women. They have blunted your brains. I shudder to think where they may lead you in the future."

"Kaliyaperumal!" roared Angappan. "Control your words. I am the one who brought you up to your current status from being a petty lawyer. Don't you dare speak to me like this!"

"Please listen," Kaliyaperumal urged. "You are falling from your position of glory into a pile of garbage."

"Stop!" Angappan raised a hand to hit Kaliyaperumal, but Kaliyaperumal caught hold of his arm.

"Angappan, I am well versed in law. Lay a finger on me and I won't hesitate to drag you to court. I quit, as of this very moment. Step aside, *da*!" he said, and left to collect his things.

Angappan stood with his mouth agape and his face pale, as if he had been slapped by a ghost.

4

Kaliyaperumal paused his long narration, and then continued.

"Once I left your father, I went back to my old profession as a lawyer. After a few months I heard that your mother had left him, taking you with her, and that your father and Mangalam had a registered marriage. I was deeply saddened that Angappan had thrown away his family for a woman like that. Now, please tell me what happened once you left—what has transpired in the last two decades, and about what happened to Maragadham."

After a silence, Manivanan said, "I'll keep it short. We would never have made it at the Sembawang rubber estate without Kala's family." He turned to look at Kala. "Her father, Ramalingam Maama, was our sole support. Her mother, Parvathi Athai, treated us like we were part of her own family.

"We laid all of our trust in the Mariamman idol, which was housed in a tiny tin shack next door to our own. My mother, who was once the wife of the owner of a huge estate, was now employed as a menial labourer, weeding from early morning to noon, soaked in sweat. She'd drop every coin she could save into a clay money pot. She used to always tell me, 'Mani, concentrate on your studies.' But there was no school inside the estate until a union member named Rathnam started a Tamil-medium school. Amma sent me there. I studied—studied with a vengeance. I wanted to give Amma back her comfortable life. Soon an English-medium school started as well, and I switched to that one. Once I completed my education I took up a job, hoping that finally Amma would be able to rest. But unfortunately, soon after I got married to Kala, she died." Choked with emotion, Manivanan stopped, unable to proceed. Silently, Kala took his hand in hers.

"Mr. Kaliyaperumal," interjected Kadiravan, "Tell me, how did you find out Manivanan's present address? Why did Angappan come back to you after all these years?"

"Last year, after almost two decades, Angappan came looking for me. His earlier arrogance and bluster had disappeared. He fell at my feet. I stepped aside. He seemed to be in a shock, scared of something; he couldn't even speak clearly. He kept repeating himself over and over. Whenever he referred to you, Manivanan, or your mother Maragadham, he broke into sobs. He told me he had lost all his wealth to Mangalam and her brother Paramanayagam, all except one bungalow. He wanted to will that bungalow to you, and he asked me to get the necessary papers ready.

"He wanted to personally hand over the will to Maragadham. In two days, I had the documents prepared. When he saw the testament, a look of relief crossed his face. The next second, he clutched his chest and slid to the floor. I held him, and he breathed his last in my arms." Kaliyaperumal finished with a sad sigh.

The others remained silent.

"After that I went to Sembawang in search of Maragadham. Kala's uncle was still there, and it wasn't any trouble to find your present address through him."

Manivanan thanked him, but insisted that he wanted nothing of his father's, and had no interest in owning the riverside bungalow. But Kadiravan interrupted him. "Let's go take a look at the place. Your father bought it twenty years ago for just one lakh ringgits. It should be worth more than a couple of crores now. Wait and make an informed decision."

Two weeks later, Manivanan, Kala, Kadiravan, and Kadiravan's future wife Padma drove off to see the bungalow by the river.

5

Every year, without fail, Manivanan and Kala would make a pilgrimage to Pathumalai Temple in Kuala Lumpur. After their *darshan* with Lord Murugan, they would stay with Kala's relatives for a couple of days and then return home.

"The bungalow has all the amenities you could want," Kaliyaperumal had told them. "Why don't you stay there for a couple of days before you go to Kuala Lumpur?"

Kadiravan thought it sensible. So Manivanan had agreed that they would have a look at the bungalow, and if it suited them, they would postpone their annual temple visit to spend a night or two there.

Kadiravan navigated, following the directions Kaliyaperumal had given them, as Manivanan drove. The women sat in the back seat, indulging in a pleasant chat. They drove through Pekan and passed a series of small hills and villages, after which they came to flat grazing land dotted with small thickets of trees.

"Take the next turn, Mani," said Kadiravan.

It was a long, narrow lane, bordered with a few trees and shrubs.

A little farther on, they could see the bungalow, standing majestically along the riverside.

Kaliyaperumal walked up to their car to welcome them.

"Please come in!" he said as they got out of the car. Padma was the last to step out. On seeing her, the old man looked startled.

"Hello sir," she laughed. "Why are you looking at me like that? I'm Padma."

Kala introduced her. "She's Kadiravan's future wife."

"I'm sorry," Kaliyaperumal said. "It's just that you look very familiar." He turned to a servant who had hurried out of the bungalow towards them. "Vairappan, get their luggage from the car and take them to their rooms." To the group, he said, "This is Vairappan. He's from a village near Pekan. He comes once a week to clean up the bungalow. So, Manivanan, how do you like the place?"

"I've seen bungalows like this in Indonesia—in Sangi—and in Sembawang, at the R.A.F. Naval Bases. It must have been built in the British days."

"You're absolutely right, Thambi. There was a Britisher who owned the rubber estate near here. It was he who built this bungalow in colonial style. Your father bought it from him. Let's go in, shall we?"

Manivanan, Kala, Kadiravan, and Padma followed the old lawyer.

Padma looked around eagerly, exclaiming in wonder at almost everything, like an excited child.

The bungalow had two floors. The ground floor had a hall, dining room, and kitchen, a separate storeroom, and two rooms for the servants. The first floor had five rooms; four of the doors were open. Each room had a double bed, a writing table, and an attached bathroom, like a modern hotel room. Two of the bedrooms overlooked the river. Manivanan decided to take those rooms for Kadiravan and himself. Kaliyaperumal chose one of the opposite rooms. "I've come here a few times since Angappan died, but I've never stayed overnight," he said.

He pointed to the locked door opposite Kadiravan's room and said, "That door has been shut since the first time I came here. I think the lock's damaged. It's stuck fast."

Manivanan tried the knob. It wouldn't budge.

"We'll have to chop the wood around the lock, which will mean getting a new door," Kaliyaperumal said. "So I've let it alone for now. I'll arrange for that to be done in a couple of days. Let's go down."

Manivanan asked hesitantly, "Please don't mistake me. But how do you manage to take care of this bungalow and pay Vairappan his salary?"

"Just before your father died, he gave me twenty thousand ringgit. I am using that."

When they came downstairs, there was toasted bread and hot coffee waiting for them.

"Please have some coffee," Kaliyaperumal invited them. "You must have set off very early from Singapore. I expected you here around four in the evening, but you made it half an hour earlier. Now you have to decide. Are you spending the night here? Or are you—"

"Oh, I like this place," Padma cut in. "Please, let's stay and have a picnic here!"

"I was sure you would love the house," Kaliyaperumal said. "You may stay as long as you wish. Vairappan has your dinner for the night ready. He's bought *mee goreng*, *roja*, and *parotta*. He'll get you breakfast tomorrow morning, too. After that, if you want to cook for yourself, the kitchen is well equipped." He took them to the kitchen to show them.

Besides many modern electrical appliances, there was also an old coal-fired clay oven and a kerosene stove.

"These are for when there are power cuts—it happens sometimes," explained Kaliyaperumal. "I also have candles and Petromax lanterns ready. And over here," he said, pointing to a door, "is the basement room."

"Looks like a regular storeroom," said Kadiravan.

"Yes, but Angappan dug out the floor and built another room in the basement." He opened the door. There was a flight of steps leading down to a cave-like room. Kaliyaperumal switched on the electric lights. "Manivanan and I will go down first."

Padma remained above, exclaiming, "I'm not going down there! It's scary...like something from an old film about rajas and ranis."

Down below, the walls were lined with cabinets filled with files and journals. One trunk was full of Angappan's diaries and photo albums. "Thambi, your father only told me of this room on his last day alive. Go

through the diaries when you have the time; you may learn more about him. You can take whatever you want."

Kadiravan checked a few files and then they came back up the stairs. "Mr. Kaliyaperumal," he said, "we're really far from the city. How did you manage to get electricity and a telephone connection?"

"It only seems a long way off because you took the highway," replied Kaliyaperumal. "Just a kilometre away, towards Kuantan, there's a lot of industry. I arranged for a power connection from there."

"Kuantan, you say... What about Maran?" asked Kala. She was eager to visit Lord Murugan at Marathandavar Temple there.

"That's about a hundred and twenty kilometres from here."

Suddenly there was a loud scream. It was Padma, who had gone to have a look at the servant quarters. Everyone ran in to check on her.

"Padma, what happened?" demanded Kadiravan. She threw herself at him and hugged him tight, shivering in fear.

"Look there..." She pointed a trembling finger at a rat blinking at them in one corner of the room.

Kadiravan burst out laughing. "What is this, Padma? That poor thing is more scared of you!"

"Don't tease me. Let me go," she wrenched herself from his arms and left the room, followed by Kala.

Vairappan arrived, saying, "I can't help one or two rats making their way in here. I'll trap them tomorrow." He raised the broom to thrash the rat, but it scampered out of sight.

"Looks like it's going to rain," Kaliyaperumal said. "Why don't you go up to the rooms, shower, and come down? Then we can chat at leisure."

Kadiravan approached Padma, who was seated on the sofa, still sulking. He caressed her cheek and said gently, "Padma, come to the room. Let's change out of these grimy clothes." Padma rose, clinging to him and whimpering like a child as they went up.

When Kadiravan and Padma had left, Kaliyaperumal asked Manivanan softly, "What do you know about Padma's family?"

Manivanan said he had known Kadiravan for a long time, but had been introduced to Padma only recently.

He went down to the storeroom to browse the albums. Kala went to the kitchen to help Vairappan.

Kaliyaperumal switched on the lights in the main hall. The lamp lit the room elegantly.

Just then it started to rain, very hard. It was as if the sky had split open and was pouring down buckets.

Kadiravan and Padma entered the room and switched on the light. "What a beautiful room," said Padma, looking around. She walked to the window to look out at the dark rain. There was nothing visible but sheets of water.

Kadiravan stood behind her and hugged her. She turned to face him. "Padma," he whispered, as he lowered his head to press his red lips to hers. Eyes shut, she melted into his arms, but suddenly she felt someone staring at her. She opened her eyes. The door silently swung closed. Padma swiftly broke away from Kadiravan's embrace.

"What is it, Padma?"

"You didn't shut the door... There was someone there!"

Kadiravan crossed over to the door and checked. It was slightly ajar. He distinctly remembered shutting it as he had come in.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing! I must have been careless when I shut it. Who would be peeking into our room? You're just jumpy. Are you still scared of that little rat?" Kadiravan stopped, worried that he might anger her again. He banged the door shut, walked back to Padma, and tried to pick up where he had left off.

"Mm-mm!... Save something for after marriage," she said, giggling and patting his cheek gently.

"Okay, madam!"

The two had had their registered marriage, but the formal ritual wedding at the temple was still two months away. They had decided to wait until after that event to become truly intimate, though they didn't hesitate to display their affection in public.

"I'm going to take a shower," Padma said, and went into the bathroom.

Kadiravan opened his travelling bag and took out a bottle of whisky, a can of soda, and a plastic glass. He poured out a peg, topped it with some soda, and took a sip. He felt energized.

He placed the glass on the table and opened a file he had brought along concerning one of his other legal cases. He finished the drink and poured another.

All of a sudden he thought he saw a shadow move across the table. Startled, he looked up.

It had been nothing but the enlarged shadow, thrown by the table lamp, of his arm as he reached for the drink. He could not help chuckling a little at himself.

It was his habit, after returning from work, to sit alone at home for an hour or two, sipping a few drinks and making notes on his files.

But now, even before he finished his second drink, he felt woozy. *Strange*, he thought. *Maybe it's the long journey; I must be more tired than I thought. I don't usually get drunk on just two pegs!*

He tried to rise from the chair but was too dizzy. He slumped forward and laid his head on his arms on the table. His eyelids felt unbelievably heavy; he could not keep them open any longer.

In the bathroom, hot water splashed over Padma's golden body. The rain outside was getting stronger. She still felt as if she were being watched. She looked around cautiously, but there was no one. And yet, she couldn't shake the feeling. She shut off the shower, wrapped herself in the Turkish towel, and called out, "Kadiravan… Kadiravan!"

There was no reply. She opened the door and peeked out. Kadiravan was asleep with his head on the table. She called again, but he did not respond.

She changed into fresh clothes, then touched him, softly murmuring, "Hello…?" She shook him by the shoulder.

"Padma… I'm…" came the slurred reply.

He sounds drunk. Must have gulped down his whisky!

She decided to go downstairs. In the hall, she noticed that the door of the room opposite hers was wide open.

Didn't Kaliyaperumal say that door was stuck? Is he in there? Or maybe it's Vairappan? She hesitated for a moment.

"Padma, it's me," came Kala's voice from inside the room.

"Kala—you? What are you doing in that room?" she replied and peeked in. She could see the silhouette of Kala's back against the window. She walked towards her.

Kala turned around.

But it was not Kala! It was a stranger—a tall, strapping man!

"Padma," he said softly, drawing her into his arms.

"*Aaa!*" Padma tried to scream and struggle out of his grasp.

"Padma, Padma..." His embrace became more and more urgent, and he lifted her face towards him.

She looked into that face. The jaw was strong, and the pair of mesmerizing eyes seemed to bore into her heart.

"Padma, my beautiful goddess...my golden flower..." he whispered into her ear.

Padma could only gape. She could not tear herself away from those eyes. Now it was she who hugged him tight.

Soundlessly, the door swung shut.

6

Manivanan was engrossed in the photo album. Kaliyaperumal was identifying the people in the pictures.

"There...this is your father, Angappan," he said, pointing to a man in a bush coat. "You look a lot like him, don't you think?"

Maybe he did. But Manivanan could not easily forgive a father who had rejected him and his mother, at an age when he desperately needed paternal love and care. The face in the photo did not touch him at all.

"Thambi, this is Mangalam," said Kaliyaperumal, picking up another photo. She and Angappan stood close to each other

The woman who wrecked his mother's life! Manivanan had no wish to even look at that bitch. Still, he did—and was taken aback!

"What is it, Thambi? Why do you look at her that way? Is it because she resembles Padma so closely?"

"Yes! The same face, the same eyes, the same height..." Manivanan replied, still staring at the photo. "Is that why you looked at her strangely when you first saw her?"

Kaliyaperumal nodded. "They must be related somehow." He picked up another photo and continued. "This is Mangalam's brother, Paramanayagam."

"Parama...Paramanayagam," Manivanan mumbled to himself. "I've heard that name before. Ah...now I have it! I remember Kadiravan telling me that was his father-in-law's name."

The puzzle was solved. Padma was Mangalam's niece! They decided to quiz her about it later.

There were many other photographs, most of them of the various functions and temple festivals that Angappan had been invited to.

In a separate envelope were four photos of Manivanan with both his parents. In these, he must have been about three or four years old. It was obvious that once Angappan hooked up with Mangalam, he had hidden the photos of his first family.

Manivanan pulled out the diaries. He was eager to know something about his parents' past.

Kala was busy in the kitchen, chatting with Vairappan as she helped him heat the dinner.

Two hours passed.

Kaliyaperumal had just begun to wonder what was keeping Kadiravan and Padma when there was a loud shout from upstairs. It was Kadiravan.

"Padma...drop that!"

The voice was audible even over the howling storm outside.

"Are you going to drop that thing or not?" Kadiravan shouted.

Thinking they were having a spat, Manivanan went to the stairway. Kaliyaperumal followed him. Kala and Vairappan came rushing out of the kitchen.

Manivanan put a foot on the first step and then froze, still as a statue. Kaliyaperumal stopped next to him, equally bewildered.

Padma was holding a dead rat by its tail and walking down the stairs as if she were in a trance. Kadiravan stood on the landing, watching her fearfully.

Kala quickly clapped her hands over her mouth to cover the scream that burst from her throat. Vairappan, too, was shocked.

Manivanan moved back as Padma reached the last step.

She grinned at them maniacally and said in a hoarse voice, "Did you see this? The stupid rat thought it could scare me. I found it and thrashed it to death!"

Kadiravan clambered down the steps behind her. "Padma! Drop that rat, will you?"

"Why are you screaming at me?" she asked, glowering at him.

The look in her eyes made Kadiravan draw back.

Vairappan stepped up. "Amma, give it to me."

Padma tilted her head at an odd angle as she handed over the rat. The poor rodent looked as if it had been clobbered with heavy object. Vairappan opened the window, fighting the wind of the storm, and threw the rat out.

Padma looked at them with a strange glint of victory in her eyes. "That rat must have imagined it could escape me," she said. "Ha! I slammed it with the heel of my shoe till it died."

They stared at her, stunned. Suddenly she stumbled and fell forward. Kadiravan reached for her, but could not catch her in time. She fell onto Kaliyaperumal, who struggled to hold her upright. But she clasped him. He could not stop her. Slowly her grip loosened and her hands sagged down. She fell on the floor in a faint. Kadiravan gathered her in his arms, carried her to the sofa, and laid her down.

"Padma… What's happened to you?"

Manivanan gently touched his shoulder. "Kadiravan…relax. There's nothing wrong with Padma."

Kala ran to the kitchen, brought out a glass of water, and splashed some on Padma's face. "Padma! Padma!" she said, slapping her cheek.

Padma's eyelids fluttered but did not open. She mumbled something. What was she saying? Kala bent her ear close to Padma's mouth to listen.

"He… Please, no… No sex, no!"

Kala drew back, appalled. "Padma, what are you saying?"

Padma writhed, as if she was fighting someone off. Kadiravan took her in his arm and hugged her. "Padma… Padma!"

"Ahh!" she screamed. "Kadiravan, where are you?"

"Padma, I'm right here next to you!"

She flipped open her lids as if she were just coming awake. She looked blankly at Kadiravan for a while, then grabbed him forcefully and began to sob. He hugged her back and patted her shoulder to comfort her, like a child. Slowly, she stopped whimpering.

Kaliyaperumal was deep in thought. Kala was still dumbstruck. Manivanan watched Kadiravan and Padma carefully.

No one dared to utter a word. The only sound was the raindrops tapping on the roof, and the raging river.

Gradually, Padma fell asleep.

Kaliyaperumal got up and said to Manivanan, "Thambi, I think I should call a doctor I know. What do you say?"

"That's a good idea. It'll be better if a doctor checks on her."

Kaliyaperumal picked up the receiver and held it to his ear. His expression changed. "It's dead!" He tried tapping the instrument a couple of times. Manivanan tried too, but to no avail.

"The phone's dead," announced Manivanan. "We can't call a doctor."

Kadiravan shot to his feet. "Mr. Kaliyaperumal, is that instrument for real, or is it just a toy phone?" He approached the old man menacingly, pointing his finger at him, his eyes red with fury.

"Wh-what do you mean?" stammered Kaliyaperumal.

"You're the one who talked us into this trip. It is your responsibility, Mr. Kaliyaperumal—"

Manivanan interrupted, his voice harsh. "Kadiravan!"

That brought Kadiravan to a halt. The old man took the opportunity to move away towards the window.

"How can you talk like that, Kadiravan?" asked Manivanan, incredulously. "Maybe the rain damaged the telephone cables. Isn't Padma's

condition our primary concern now? This is no time to start playing the blame game."

Kadiravan sank down onto the sofa, burying his head between his knees. Kala moved to Manivanan, clasped his hand, and whispered, "Athaan, I'm scared. Can we...?"

Manivanan pressed her hand softly and asked, "Where's your prayer book? That *Kandha Shashti Kavacham* that you always carry around? Read it aloud."

She nodded, looking around for her handbag. "Vairappan, where's my bag?" she asked.

"I took it to your room, madam. Do you need it?"

She nodded. Vairappan went up the stairs, as Manivanan stood gazing out of the window into the darkness.

"There's a torch in the store room," said Kaliyaperumal. "I'll go get it." He left, and immediately returned with the torch.

Manivanan took it and went to open the front door. In the faint light of the torch he could see that the front yard was flooded. The water had risen above the car tyres.

"It's raining harder and harder, Thambi," said Kaliyaperumal. "Looks like it's going to keep coming down for a while."

Manivanan silently shut the front door. "Can you see the river from the other side of the bungalow?"

"Yes, Thambi. You can see it from the back door."

They went to the kitchen. Even without opening the door they could hear the river. The water was already seeping in from beneath the back door. Kaliyaperumal opened it a little bit. The roar of the flood was deafening, the sharp downpour stinging. Immediately, he shut the door again.

Then...

Vairappan entered the bedroom and switched on the lights. He saw Kala's bag on the table and extended his hand to take it—when the lights went out. He felt a strange presence next to him, a cold air that curdled his blood. He grabbed at Kala's bag and stumbled out of the room. When he reached the head of the stairs, he heard someone laughing behind him.

"Aiya… Aiya!" he shouted.

"What is it Vairappan?" Manivanan asked from below, and swung the torch towards him. In the light, Vairappan felt bolder, and ran down the steps gasping for breath.

"What happened, Vairappan?"

"I was scared because the lights suddenly went off. So I…" He did not proceed, but stood staring at Padma. She lay on the sofa deep in slumber, or perhaps unconscious.

"Manivanan, the lights may be off for a long time. We should get the Petromaxes handy, and the candles and kerosene lamps," suggested Kaliyaperumal.

The two of them went down to the storeroom. Vairappan followed, furtively looking behind him. Kala opened her bag, took out the *Kandha Shashti Kavacham*, and began to read it. Padma turned over on the sofa, while Kadiravan looked at her anxiously.

In the storeroom Kaliyaperumal pointed to the carton of lanterns and candles. "Vairappan, you've already cleaned and oiled them? Then take them up and light them." Once Vairappan left with the carton, Kaliyaperumal turned to Manivanan and said, "Thambi, I'm troubled."

"I'm confused too. What's happening to Padma and Kadiravan?"

The two men came out of the storeroom.

Vairappan was lighting the Petromax. He looked back and said, "Aiya, the water is seeping into the kitchen. When I went in to get the kerosene, it was almost an inch high."

Manivanan went into the kitchen to check. It was true. The water level was rapidly rising.

The lanterns, once lit, helped to dispel the gloom of the bungalow.

"Aiya," said Vairappan, "before the flood becomes unmanageable, shall I go to the next village for help?"

Kala stopped her chanting for a moment and looked at him, surprised.

"Vairappan, I know that you're the only one familiar with this area. Still…" Kaliyaperumal seemed doubtful.

"Just three hundred metres from here, there is a wooden bridge over the river that will take me to the next village. It is high above the flood level. So it should be safe."

Kadiravan said, "He's right. The telephone's dead and the river is rising. Oh, I hate this place! I wish I could carry Padma on my shoulder and walk out into the flood."

"Vairappan, check the water level. If you can manage, then proceed. Otherwise, return at once," ordered Manivanan. Vairappan nodded vigorously. "And if you can find a telephone that isn't dead, inform the police about our situation."

"Relief efforts might have already started in the nearby villages," Kaliyaperumal said. "Maybe you can contact them, too."

"I'll try my best to be back in an hour or two," promised Vairappan. He paused at Kala's side, as if he wanted to tell her something, but changed his mind and walked towards the door.

"Don't worry, I've seen worse floods than this," he said, stepping out into the rain with no umbrella.

"Remember what I said," called out Manivanan.

"Yes aiya!" he called back.

Just then they heard the sound of a low-flying helicopter. But before they could aim their torchlight upwards, it had passed them. The water was coming in through the front door.

"Keep the door shut, or the water will come in!" Vairappan shouted from the gate.

It was pitch dark. Vairappan walked with the help of his torchlight, carefully stepping on the rocks that poked up above the drowned plants and shrubs. He saw that the river had broken its banks. Still, he was relieved to be out of the bungalow. He had come many times to clean the place, but he usually made those trips in the daytime, and was sure to return home before it was too late. Once, though, he had gotten delayed and had to work till almost seven in the evening. He had been cleaning the first floor when he thought he saw the door to the locked room swing open. Dismissing it as his imagination, he had started down the stairway—when he heard a strange laugh. He had run to the living room, from where he could see two Malay boys playing on the riverbank.

He had told himself to relax; maybe it was their laughter he had heard. But this evening he had heard the same laugh again…

In the few hours he had spent with Kala, he had come to respect her. When she had inquired about his daughter Meenakshi, she had seemed sincere and caring. Before he left the bungalow, he wanted to warn her not to go to the first floor alone, but he couldn't bring himself to say it.

He bravely forged ahead through the flood, hoping to return quickly with some help.

"If helicopters are being sent out, many of the neighbouring villages must already be under water," Kaliyaperumal observed.

Padma was gradually waking up. "Kadiravan… Kadiravan!"

He rushed to her side and hugged her. "What's happening, Padma?" She buried her face in his chest and started to sob.

"Padma, what is it?" asked Kala, coming closer.

When Padma looked up at her, the sobbing abruptly stopped. She was grinning. And her eyes…!

The next second…

Padma wrenched herself from Kadiravan's arms, sprang up, and hugged Kala, as a man would. Even as Kala tried to struggle free of her hold, Padma held her face and kissed her hard on the cheek. When she aimed for her lips, Kala pushed her away, exclaiming, "Padma, you demon!"

Padma fell back onto the sofa, where she immediately stretched out luxuriantly and gave Kaliyaperumal a teasing look.

Kadiravan, looking embarrassed, tried to laugh it off. "Just a show of affection among friends, I guess."

Manivanan was too shocked to comment. Only after Kala rushed to his side did he even start to think. Kaliyaperumal was equally stunned. As an old man who had seen the world, he realized that Padma and Kadiravan must be under the influence of some evil spirit.

"I don't like this place!" exclaimed Padma. "Kadiravan, let's go to sleep."

"Okay, as you wish," said Kadiravan. "Good night folks," he called out, linking his arm with Padma's and walking to the stairway.

At the first step, Padma turned to him and gushed, "Please, carry me..." Kadiravan laughed, gathered her in his arms, and began to climb the steps.

The three downstairs heard a door bang shut.

"We shouldn't stay here," whimpered Kala. "Let's go. I can't handle this."

"Vairappan will be back soon with help," Manivanan said. "Be patient until then."

Kaliyaperumal simply sat in his chair, as if he were nailed to it.

7

Vairappan was making his way slowly through the waist-high water. The rain was still pouring down in sheets. *Paleer, paleer!* Bolts of lightning flashed, giving him some idea of where he was headed. He aimed his torch. The water was almost licking the bridge. He would have to hurry across to the other side. He waded through the water towards the bridge.

He advanced slowly, sweeping away the swirling waves with one hand, then suddenly came to a halt. At the other end of the bridge there was a figure.

An electric flash lit the form in silhouette. A roll of thunder in the background added to the eeriness. Once the light faded, the figure was no longer visible. Vairappan swept his torchlight over the bridge and found it again, but was too scared to approach.

"Why have you stopped? I am Manickam. Come on over," the figure called out, with a laugh—the same laugh Vairappan had heard in the bungalow. He looked around in fear, but there was no one except himself and the figure on the bridge.

Vairappan gathered what little remained of his courage and launched forward again. In his haste he stumbled; the torch slipped from his grasp and floated off in the whirling waters. The spot he had stumbled into was quite deep. He tried to swim, but the current was too strong. His leg got caught in something. He tried to fight his way to the surface, but

was instantly tugged back. He strove to shout for help, but his voice was drowned by the water.

He realized someone was holding on to his legs. He struggled hard to free himself, but could not. It was as though his legs were bound by iron.

8

Even though she was still drowsy, Padma straightened her clothes and got out of the bed. Kadiravan was fast asleep. He had had a drink when they came up, to relax. Padma was not used to alcohol, but she too had had a small one. Was that the reason she was in a daze? Her head was pounding.

Then she saw the door to their bedroom opening, and *he* was standing there.

She staggered back, terrified. She fell onto the bed and tried to shake Kadiravan awake.

The door swung fully open.

"Padma, my sweet little parrot… Come to me!" he said in a hushed tone as he quietly approached her.

When she looked into his eyes she felt the same charge once again. He clasped her and she melted into his embrace. He gently led her out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Kadiravan gave a light snore as he rolled over.

Manivanan was still browsing through his father's diaries. The one labelled 1941 was empty—not a word was written in it. The following years had a few entries, but most were illegible. He flipped through the pages, determined to decipher them.

No one in the bungalow was interested in dinner.

"Maybe a cup of coffee would help?" suggested Kaliyaperumal.

Kala rose to make some, and the old man followed her to the kitchen, which was a foot deep in water. They could hear the harsh waves crashing against the back door. Their situation was getting worse.

"It's been almost an hour since Vairappan left," said Kala.

"It's not easy to make your way through a flood. Vairappan is a brave man. You must stop worrying."

Just then there was a loud series of thumps on the front door. It was difficult to tell whether it was someone knocking or just the waters banging something against the door.

Manivanan opened it. In a flash, the water gushed in, and along with it came Vairappan.

"Athaan!" screamed Kala, and ran in from the kitchen. Kaliyaperumal dropped the coffee cups and followed her. Realizing that the flood was pouring into the house, he fought to shut the door, but he couldn't.

Manivanan, who had been thrown back by the force of the deluge, got up with great effort. He helped Kaliyaperumal close the door and then focused on Vairappan.

Kala sat on the drenched floor next to him and said softly, "Vairappan..."

He opened his eyes painfully. "Amma," he whispered. He saw Kaliyaperumal and beckoned him to come closer.

No one could make out what he was saying. Kaliyaperumal had to lean in close to listen.

"The ghost... Manickam's ghost..." Vairappan gasped.

"Manickam?" asked Kaliyaperumal, shocked.

"Yes, Manickam! He drowned me..." Vairappan said, and then fell silent. Blood spurted from his mouth. His last breath escaped him.

Kala was sobbing silently.

Perplexed, Manivanan asked Kaliyaperumal, "Who is this Manickam?"

The old lawyer did not respond till Manivanan prodded him again. Very reluctantly he raised his head. "Thambi, I had hoped that I would never have to tell you this. Manickam was the man your father chopped to bits!"

"*Aaa!*" Kala sat up with a startled scream.

"What?" demanded Manivanan. "My father, a murderer? Why did he do it?"

9

Mangalam had enchanted Angappan with her beauty. He submitted himself unquestioningly at her feet, a slave to his lust. He believed every word she said to be the ultimate truth: "You are my world, my life...the god who gave me a new birth!" But Mangalam was after just one thing: Angappan's wealth—all of it.

And still she sought out other men to satisfy her sexual desire. One of these was Manickam.

It is a rare person who, once he has climbed up the social ladder, spares a thought for his impoverished past. Most simply get swept up in the current, and Angappan was one of these. He had one set of friends with whom he could get drunk, another set to fetch him prostitutes, and yet another set to gamble with. His circle of friends kept growing larger by the day.

Manickam was the manager of one of the star restaurants at which Angappan met his ladies. He also moonlighted as a pimp for many such women, and so proved very useful to Angappan's thirst.

Manickam had deep blue eyes that were irresistible to women. Perhaps he used a particular charm smeared on his eyebrows; or perhaps it was hypnotism. But there was no doubt that women were drawn to him, and they seemed to find their carnal pleasures satisfied by him. He introduced a few such women, whom he had tired of, to Angappan.

Meanwhile, Angappan bought the riverside bungalow and had an ostentatious housewarming ceremony, to which he invited Manickam. Several rich and famous people of Singapore were invited. Mangalam received them as the hostess, dressed in a costly Kanchivaram silk sari and decked in jewels. At the party Manickam saw her for the first time, and he was floored. He could only speak to her for few minutes, but that was enough for him to convince her to meet secretly with him the next day.

Days...weeks...months passed, and the affair between Manickam and Mangalam grew deeper.

Angappan had to travel often to Kuala Lumpur and Penang on business, and those tours lasted for more than a couple of days. Manickam spent those nights in the bungalow with Mangalam. She took care that Angappan had not a shred of doubt concerning their relationship.

When Kaliyaperumal broke with him for good, Angappan handed over the management of his concerns to Rosalyn, an Anglo-Indian woman in her forties who was fluent in English and a skilled administrator. Angappan trusted her completely, and respected her too.

In those days, Anglo-Indian women were referred to by the Tamils as *Chattaikarrargal*, "women who wear frocks". They tended to think of themselves as superior to the natives, and conducted themselves similarly to the British. But Rosalyn was different. "My father was a white man, yes," she said. "But my mother was a Tamil woman. So I am Tamil too, and I shall live by those ethics."

Spending two days in close proximity with her in the office was enough for Angappan to become enchanted by her rosy complexion and ample curves. As she looked almost white, he thought she would succumb to his desires. But when he approached her, she lashed out at him: "I am a Tamil woman, and I honour those moral codes." Since then, his respect for her had grown double-fold.

When she wasn't working for Angappan, Rosalyn—a single woman—spent her time volunteering in an orphanage. She convinced Angappan contribute to this cause as well.

It was Rosalyn who told him about Mangalam's affair. She also told him about the thousands Mangalam had transferred from their joint account to Manickam. Rosalyn had already confirmed her doubts with the bank.

It was only then that Angappan realized he was being taken for ride. He remembered a murder case that had caused a rage in 1952, where a wife and her lover had done away with her husband.

He was scared that he would be killed too, that the woman for whom he had forsaken his wife and child was today resting her head on another man's lap and plotting to murder him, Angappan.

It had taken seventeen years for him to face the truth. Now he longed for Maragadham and Manivanan. He wished his long-time friends Kaliyaperumal and Kadar Moideen were there to help him.

He could now see why Mangalam had been avoiding him for the last few months. At first he wanted to barge into the bungalow and demand an explanation about Manickam. But that would be useless, of course. She would cry, or rage at him, or simply leave him forever. He had lost fights with her many times. He decided not to see her right away. But his anger did not abate.

He sat in his room alone for a long time, thinking. Then he called in Rosalyn.

"Rosalyn, call my home. Tell Mangalam that I had been trying to call but couldn't get through. Inform her that I'm off on a trip to Penang for three days."

Rosalyn looked on silently.

"Also, call Mangalam's brother Paramanayagam, at the other estate office," he continued. "Tell him I'm coming there to audit his accounts tomorrow."

In those days, wealthy men like Angappan involved themselves with two institutions to retain their power and authority. One was the police, and the other was the mafia. These relationships were necessary to safeguard fraudulent deals. The gangsters, of course, were ruthless mercenaries who would commit any crime for money.

Angappan left his office, reached Kuantan, and called his Chinese gangster friend, Ah Hai. The meeting between them lasted over two and a half hours. Angappan then checked into a hotel he'd never been to before, and drank in his room till dawn.

At seven in the morning he made a call to Ah Hai, who gave him this information: "There was a car with number plate 763 that stayed overnight at your bungalow."

Angappan knew it was Manickam's car.

Nine o'clock in the morning.

Manickam left Mangalam after many passionate kisses. She stood

at the doorstep waving him off. Muthulakshmi, the maid, studiously ignored them and continued with her chores—not that Mangalam was bothered about her presence.

As Manickam turned onto the main road, he nearly collided head-on with a Chinese cyclist. He swerved to avoid him, but could not. The cyclist leapt agilely out of his seat. Anxious, Manickam got out to check. The cyclist sprang on him, swore in Chinese, and kicked him hard. Almost at once, five massive Chinese men appeared from behind the trees and joined the melee. Overpowered by the sudden assault, Manickam blacked out.

The cycle was loaded into a Morris Minor that had been parked behind the trees. Two of the goons got in and the rest carried Manickam into the backseat. A young Chinese man whose arms were covered in green tattoos drove the car, speeding as recklessly as if he were in a Formula race.

Angappan had spent the whole night and day guzzling beer and whisky, without sleep. By three in the afternoon, his head was threatening to burst. The telephone rang loudly.

"*Semua suda siyap*. Everything is ready for you. You can come now," said the voice at the other end, switching between Malay and English.

Angappan knew where to go.

When he arrived…

…three hundred meters away from the main road, amidst the dense jungle, alongside a stream…

…there lay Manickam—in a pool of blood.

"Dey, Manickam!"

Manickam opened his eyes painfully. There stood Angappan, raging in anger.

With great difficulty, Manickam raised his arms, pressed his palms together, and pleaded, "Please forgive me. I'm sorry."

One of the thugs threw a sickle to Angappan, who caught it and lifted it high.

"Sir… Sir!" sobbed Manickam. "Don't...!"

In one slash, Angappan chopped off Manickam's raised arms as he screamed. After that he went on hacking him into pieces, until Ah Hai gently removed the sickle from his hand.

Ah Hai took the still-drunk Angappan back to his room, leaving his henchmen to dispose of Manickam's remains and bring Angappan's car back to his hotel.

Angappan spent the rest of the day in a haze. He dreamt of his wife Maragadham and his son Manivanan. In his dream, Mangalam gave him a steamy kiss as he chopped Manickam to bits.

At seven that evening, Mangalam called the hotel where Manickam worked and learned that he hadn't reported for work in the morning. She knew he had been headed there to apply for sick leave and then return to her. Troubled, she went to take a shower.

Outside the bathroom, she heard Manickam call, "Mangalam!"

"You've come?" she asked, opening the door. But there was no one.

I must have been thinking about him too much, she thought to herself as she got dressed. *I keep imagining his voice all the time.*

She came out to the living room, called for the maid, and asked, "Has Paramanayagam come in?"

"Not yet."

What an ingrate! To forget his elder sister, who gave him a life of luxury, all because of a woman. Just then she heard two cars screech to a halt at the front door. The next moment there were loud bangs and kicks from outside.

"*Buka lakas, buka.* Hurry up and open the door!" came a harsh call in Malay.

While Muthulakshmi stood, too stunned to move, Mangalam went to door and demanded, "Who is that? Want do you want?"

"*Buka! Buka!*"

Whoever it was, they were ready to break open the door.

Petrified, Mangalam turned the latch. Three huge Chinese men stood there, flanked by several others. Their leader shoved her aside and entered the room.

"Do you know whose house this—?" Mangalam did not complete her question.

"*Saya thauv*, I know. Mr. Angappan's!"

He turned round and barked orders to his men in Chinese. Two of them stepped up and grabbed Mangalam. Even as she screamed, they carried her to the car, threw her in, and punched her in the face. She fell unconscious in mid-scream.

The maid ran out calling for help. "*Aiyyo, aiyyo!*" Another thug pulled her back and told her, in Malay, to shut up.

Muthulakshmi was the daughter of a poor rubber estate labourer. She sent a prayer to their guardian god, Muneeswaran, and then clamped her mouth shut, trembling with fear.

After the two cars left, she sat alone, huddled in a corner, waiting for dawn. At daybreak, she gathered her belongings and left the bungalow for good.

When Mangalam regained consciousness, she was in a huge hall. Next to her was a strange woman weeping. Around her were women of every possible race: Malay, Indonesian, Thai, Chinese…

Some lounged on the floor. Others stood, leaning against the wall.

The windows were covered with black cloth.

She heard sounds of gamblers from the outside, busy with their Mahjong. From the next room came a woman's sobs, in Chinese—"*Mai paa! Mai paa!* Please don't hit me!"—followed by a brutal male voice shouting out commands. Mangalam's blood froze in terror. She saw the other women share looks of alarm.

Mangalam couldn't understand where she was. She asked the women in stammering Malay and English. They gave no reply.

The boisterous noises of the Mahjong game continued.

The next morning, Angappan got a telephone call. "Mangalam has been taken to a brothel house. In two hours she'll start servicing customers, or else she'll be beaten to death!"

10

Kaliyaperumal stopped his narration and took a deep breath. Manivanan, from the opposite sofa, had been listening keenly, interrupting now and then to ask for clarification. Kala sat nearby. She was too disgusted with the debauched life that her late father-in-law had led to concentrate on the story. Instead, she kept looking at Vairappan's body and listening for any odd sounds from upstairs.

Kaliyaperumal resumed.

"By packing Mangalam off to a brothel, Angappan had taken his revenge on her. Paramanayagam, her brother, who had embezzled most of Angappan's wealth, vanished. I helped Angappan cover up Manickam's murder.

"After all this, Angappan nearly lost his mind. Since he had lost most of his money, he wanted to protect what little was left. So he brought me his documents.

"Thambi, Vairappan's death makes it clear that we are all in danger. Only... I don't know how to explain...."

Manivanan thought he understood the old man's anxiety. "Do you really believe he was killed by Manickam's ghost?"

"Yes, Thambi. And I have no idea how we are going to escape the same fate."

"I have never believed in ghosts," replied Manivanan. "I remember being scared of such things when I was a child, and we were huddled in our tiny hut. My mother would say, 'Don't worry. Remember that we have Mariamman next to us.' I've also read the words of the poet Bharathi: *Chant the Dark Mari's name, and even Yaman will stay away from you.* If the goddess wants to save us, she will. We cannot leave this house because of the flood. Maybe another helicopter will pass over, and we can call for help. Let's be ready to face whatever comes."

Kala stared at him, unblinkingly. Kaliyaperumal started to say something, but Manivanan stopped him.

"I know what you're thinking. I understand that you are bothered about Padma. We might have to face further trouble from her, but let's be brave."

Suddenly there was a loud sound from the basement. Something heavy had crashed down. The three got up, startled. Manivanan and Kaliyaperumal hurried over to the staircase, and saw that one of the basement walls had come down in the flood. The old files and journals were floating in the water. In a few moments the storeroom was completely flooded. They shut the door, but the water was already seeping into the main house. Vairappan's body began to gently float. With the lawyer's help, Manivanan carried it to the dining table.

Kala was heartbroken. She kept thinking about Vairappan's love for his ten-year-old daughter Meenakshi. He had told Kala of his plans to educate her, so that she could become a Tamil teacher. Kala still had her handbag and the Murugan Prayer book clenched in her hand. Manivanan realized what was disturbing her and stayed silent.

They gathered the Petromaxes and candles and went upstairs. Kaliyaperumal thought they should stay together in one room. He was too scared to be alone. Kala led them to the stairway, followed by Manivanan and Kaliyaperumal. They could see Padma lurching about on the landing, as if she were sleepwalking.

"Padma," whispered Kala. Padma, without a response, went into the room on the right and shut the door. The three on the steps gaped at her in horror. The door of the room opposite, which had been jammed shut, was now wide open.

They stood there, soaked, shivering from cold and fright.

"We have to go and check that room," whispered the lawyer.

Manivanan agreed, but first he went to Kadiravan's room and listened for movement in there. He heard nothing except Kadiravan's loud snore. For a moment, he wondered if should wake him up, but then decided not to. He placed a lit Petromax next to the door. The corridor brightened up like a summer day. They walked to the haunted room and looked in through the open door.

"Thambi," said Kaliyaperumal, "this was your father's bedroom. When he discovered that Mangalam had shared this bed with Manickam, he was devastated. He jammed the lock so that the door could never be opened again. But now..." He looked around fearfully. "I think Padma just left this room, while we were coming up the stairs."

Through the darkness, Manivanan could make out an easy chair along the wall.

"Athaan!" called Kala in a trembling voice.

"You stay with Kaliyaperumal in the corridor," said Manivanan. "I'm going to check the room."

"Wait, Thambi!" cried Kaliyaperumal. Kala stood beside him, not knowing what to do, her heart racing.

Manivanan, paying no heed, stepped into the room with the Petromax. It was a richly decorated bedroom, but perhaps because it had been shut for so long, there was a lingering stench. There was a wide bed on which the sheets and pillows were in disarray. The floor was covered with dust, and Manivanan could make out the tiny footprints of a woman's shoes leading from the door to the bed.

It was pitch black outside the windows.

Manivanan turned around to leave when the door slammed shut on its own, almost smacking into his face. From behind the door, he heard Kala gasp, "Athaan!"

"What happened?" cried Kaliyaperumal.

Manivanan said a silent prayer to his mother. Then, to Kala, he said through the door, "Don't be scared. We must be brave; there's no point in crying." He turned the doorknob, but it didn't work. He banged the door with his body, to no avail.

"Thambi, I don't know what to do!" shouted Kaliyaperumal. "Didn't I tell you to wait? Let me go down and see if I can find an *aruval* or a hammer to break down the door,"

"Yes, please do," said Manivanan.

Kaliyaperumal picked up a Petromax and went down the stairs. Kala sat down in front of the closed door. Her watch showed half past one.

She had not realized it was so late. In another three hours, it would be a new day. Hopefully they would find some help at daybreak.

Inside the room, Manivanan wondered if he might be able to escape through the window. But the storm outside was too strong. He looked again at the bed. There was a pair of bangles on the floor next to it. He noticed another door on the other wall; he opened it to find a toilet, crawling with cockroaches. He shut the door immediately.

Down on the ground floor, Kaliyaperumal saw that the water level in the living room was much higher. Trying not to look at Vairappan's body laid out on the dining table, he went to the kitchen, where he found a meat cleaver. Then he opened the drawer and found an aruval. He picked them both up in one hand, and, carrying the Petromax in the other, went back up the stairway.

Inside the locked room, the stench had become so powerful that Manivanan was starting to feel suffocated.

11

Startled awake from his snoring, Kadiravan found it difficult to open his eyes. When he finally did, he could not believe what he saw.

Across the room, Padma was slumped drowsily in a chair, her sari in disarray. Standing behind the chair and leaning over her was Kaliyaperumal, his hands kneading her breasts as he bent down to kiss her.

"Dey! Kaliyaperumal!"

The old lawyer looked up, shocked, and then opened the door and ran out of the room.

"You can't escape me!" shouted Kadiravan, getting up from the bed and rushing over to Padma. He shook her, slapped her cheeks, and tugged her hair, but she would not wake up. Then he too ran out into the corridor.

Kala, sitting on the floor outside the locked the door, looked up in surprise.

Hearing the commotion, Manivanan asked from inside, "Kala, what's going on out there?"

Kadiravan was yelling, "Where is that Kaliyaperumal?" Just then, he saw the lawyer come up the stairs, holding the meat cleaver and the aruval.

"So you've armed yourself, have you? To kill me?" asked Kadiravan.

Kala saw that things were about to become nasty. "Kadiravan, what are you saying?" Kala demanded. "Athaan is locked inside the room. Kaliyaperumal is bringing the aruval to chop down the door."

"No Kala! You don't know what this dirty old man was doing! I just saw him kissing Padma!"

"You couldn't have. He was here with me!" said Kala, springing to her feet.

On the steps, Kaliyaperumal realized that Kadiravan was now under the evil spirit's control. With his hands trembling, still holding the Petromax, he quietly set down the blades on a stair in front of him. He walked up to Kala and gently said to Kadiravan, "Thambi, Padma is like a daughter to me. Remember that we are in the presence of a terrible ghostly power."

Ignoring him, Kadiravan rushed to grab the aruval, and turned on Kaliyaperumal in a fit of rage.

"Kadiravan! Please, don't!" wept Kala. "Athaan!" she shouted at the locked door. "Kadiravan has got an aruval. Tell him to drop it!"

From inside, Manivanan called out, "Kadiravan! Listen to me!"

"Please, Thambi, don't do this to me," begged the old man.

Kala was now crying out for Padma, hoping that she would wake up and stop him.

"Get out of my way, Kala!" warned Kadiravan as he advanced towards the lawyer.

Kala tried to reach out, still pleading. "Kadiravan, please, I beg you!"

He turned around and silenced her with a terrifying look. She stepped back.

Kadiravan began to hack at Kaliyaperumal with a series of slashes—at his head, hands, waist, and chest. He chopped him to bits like a butcher mincing meat. The floor was covered with blood. The old man's cries of agony slowly died away.

Kala passed out in horror.

Inside the room, Manivanan threw his body against the door once more, this time with such force that it finally sprung open. He stared dumbstruck at what he saw.

Kaliyaperumal's body lay dismembered, and still Kadiravan was maniacally chopping him into tinier and tinier pieces. Kadiravan's face, his hair, his clothes, the walls, and the floor were all bathed in red.

Manivanan rushed to Kadiravan, kicked him in the face, snatched the aruval from his hand and threw it aside. Kadiravan crumpled to the floor.

Manivanan ran to the unconscious Kala, knelt beside her, and lifted her up, gently slapping her cheeks. Very slowly, she opened her eyes and hugged him, sobbing, "Athaan…"

Against the other wall, Kadiravan struggled to sit up. Horrified, he looked at Kaliyaperumal's mutilated body. With trembling lips, he called out, "Mani… Mani…"

Kala looked over Manivanan's shoulder. "Sinner! You killed him—just because you thought you saw him kissing Padma!"

Kadiravan slowly stood up. Manivanan, expecting him to attack again, let go of Kala and leapt to his feet.

"Mani! Kala!" gasped Kadiravan. "I swear I don't know what I've done. I drank a couple of whiskies…then I lost consciousness. All I remember is a shadowy figure coming towards me. After that I don't know. When I finally woke up, I saw Kaliyaperumal kissing Padma. No, I'm wrong… It wasn't Kaliyaperumal… it was that shadowy figure. Aiyyo… I think my head will burst!" he wailed. Holding his head in his hands, he sank back to the floor.

Then they heard Padma cry out from the room like a lost child. "Appa, Appa!"

The three in the corridor did not move. Pathetically, Padma cried out again, "Kala, where are you?"

Kala looked hesitantly at Manivanan.

"Go," he told her. "I'll come with you."

Kala clutched his hand and, trying not to look at what remained of Kaliyaperumal, walked to Padma's room.

Inside, Padma sat in the centre of the bed, her clothes a mess. Seeing Manivanan, she tried to cover herself. He stood at the door, embarrassed.

It was two o'clock in the morning.

Padma seemed much calmer now, but she still seemed confused about everything that had happened. Kala, remembering when Padma had tried to kiss her, was reluctant to go to her.

"Kala," sobbed Padma, "it all seems like a dream. He was…no; it wasn't a *he*…it wasn't human. Maybe it was a *pey*… I know I was with it for a long time. Kala, you must get away from this bungalow. Go away! You'll be its next victim! Appa warned me not to come here, but I didn't listen. Now I've lost everything. Where is Kadiravan? I want to see him… I have to see him!"

She jumped off the bed, ran out past Kala and Manivanan into the corridor, and came to a sudden halt, staring wide-eyed at Kaliyaperumal's butchered body and at Kadiravan, splashed with blood.

"Oh God, what happened?" Her scream echoed throughout the bungalow.

Kadiravan looked back at her miserably. "Padma, I did this. I saw him kissing you…"

Loud laughter erupted from the haunted room.

While the rest stood in shock, Padma rushed into the room. "You bastard… You bastard! Show yourself!"

"Padma, don't! Don't go in!" cried Manivanan, following her, along with Kadiravan, who was still looking dazed.

Inside the room, they could see Manickam's ghostly image in the glass of the window.

"You bastard! You defiled me! My whole body is burning with shame!" she wept, and leapt at the sheet of glass.

The windowpane shattered and she fell through it. It all happened in a fraction of a second. Manivanan rushed to the window to try to grab her feet, but it was too late. With a desperate cry of "Appa!" she fell headlong into the roaring flood.

"What happened? What happened to my Padma?" Kadiravan shouted. He ran to the window, ready to jump out after her. Manivanan had to restrain him.

"No! Let me go! My Padma... I want to die! I want to die with my Padma!" He tried to wrench himself from Manivanan's grasp and pushed him to the floor, but Manivanan quickly rose to his feet and forcefully shoved Kadiravan out of the room. Howling "Padma!" at the top of his lungs, he fell into the corridor.

The room's door slammed shut. For the second time, Manivanan was locked inside.

Outside in the corridor, Kala stood gaping at the closed door, not even daring to whisper to her athaan. Padma's last warning to her to leave the bungalow echoed in her mind. Kadiravan struggled up again and knocked loudly on the door. "Mani, Mani! What's going on?"

"Kadiravan, where is Kala? Why isn't she saying anything?"

"She's here."

The current suddenly came on, and the lights began to flicker. Inside the room, Manivanan knew the climax was approaching...

But how would it end?

12

Paramanayagam's only daughter Padma had lost her mother when she was ten. She had been the apple of her father's eye. She grew up to be an adamant woman; after her registered marriage to Kadiravan, she made it a habit to return home very late at night. Paramanayagam did not like this attitude, but he never said anything, as he was afraid of her reaction.

On the morning when she had informed him about her trip to Pekan, he was shocked.

"Kadiravan has to go there to check on a bungalow on the banks of the Sungai Tinggi; his friend Manivanan has come into an inheritance," she told him. "I said I'd go along. We'll spend the night there and come back tomorrow."

"Why didn't you tell me about this yesterday?" Paramanayagam demanded.

She did not reply.

"Padma," he pleaded, "don't mistake me. I don't know which bungalow you're speaking of...but don't go."

"Why?"

Just then the telephone rang. It was Kadiravan, calling to say he would be there to pick her up in ten minutes.

It was only after he arrived that Paramanayagam discovered whose bungalow they planned to go stay in. Even before he could digest the information, Padma and Kadiravan had left.

Paramanayagam sat like a stone, memories of the past flooding in.

As Mangalam's younger brother, Paramanayagam had grown up in luxury. He fell in love with Kanmani, the daughter of a famous textile showroom owner in Kuala Lumpur.

When he learned about Mangalam's affair with Manickam, he ignored it at first. Later, when he told his sister about Kanmani, he felt that she was a bit too enthusiastic about it. He knew her eagerness was due only to Kanmani's wealth.

Kanmani's father was a casteist, and was adamant that she marry within his caste. Paramanayagam and Kanmani had no other option but to elope.

Paramanayagam took the money that he had embezzled from Angappan, and Kanmani gathered as many of her family's jewels as she could lay her hands on. They left for Singapore to start a new life.

Paramanayagam started a hotel in Tanjong Pahar. He wanted to forget his days in Malaysia, but after their daughter was born and was the spitting image of Mangalam, he found it more and more difficult. He

remained ignorant of Mangalam's fate—that she had landed in a brothel and had spent her last days in the gutters of the red-light area, sick with tuberculosis.

On that morning when Padma left home for Pekan, Paramanayagam was restless with anxiety.

By the afternoon, Paramanayagam had decided to follow his daughter. He took a flight to Kuala Lumpur and rode from there to Pekan in a cab. The flight took off from Paya Lebar Airport and reached Kuala Lumpur at six. Because of the storm and the damaged roads, it was well past one thirty in the morning when he reached Pekan. The cab driver kept raising his rates. All the villages along the Sungai Tinggi were submerged in the floods; emergency relief camps had been set up in some places. Paramanayagam approached an army officer in charge of one of the camps for help.

Caught inside the locked room, Manivanan looked out through the shattered windowpane. Outside, below the window, he noticed a ledge running along the wall. Could he walk along the ledge and make it to the next room? It was probably suicidal. Even a tiny slip would send him headlong into the raging floodwaters. But when the alternative was to stay here, locked inside the haunted room… He decided it was worth a shot.

He went to the lock door and called out, "Kala…!"

Kala, who had been slumped against the door, sat up alert when she heard her husband's voice. "Athaan, what's going on now? Aiyyo, what's happening?"

"Kala… Go into the next bedroom and open the window. I'm going to try and walk there along the ledge outside. The power might go off again… Light some candles so I can see where I'm going."

Kala was too tense to even murmur assent. She stumbled through the corridor, where Kadiravan was still standing, too shocked to react, and into the next bedroom. Checking that her prayer book was beside her on

the table, she began lighting the candles, all the while chanting under her breath, "Muruga, Muruga!"

Carefully Manivanan climbed down to the ledge. It was just a few centimetres wide. The rain was pouring down heavier than ever. About ten metres ahead, he could make out the light from the room where Kala had lit the candles. His clothes were already soaked through. He must not slip; he would plunge into the river and be swept away, or else break all his bones on one of the submerged rocks.

He had to get the next room. He had to save Kala.

His mind travelled back to his childhood, to a memory of his mother Maragadham holding his tiny fingers and guiding him through the rain. He held her hand tightly, whispering, "Amma…"

The thoughts of his mother gave him strength, and he began to move forward along the ledge.

In the room ahead, Kala had placed the lit candles below the window so that the wind would not blow them out. She sat waiting, praying that Manivanan would make it safely to her side.

In the corridor, Kadiravan suddenly heard Manickam's sinister laughter from somewhere beside him. He looked around, startled. Then the lights flickered back on, and he could see it… Manickam's hellish apparition, hovering before him. It was neither human nor ghostly, a terrifying sight.

"You… You're the one! *You killed my Padma!*" he screamed.

Instantly, the spectre in front of him dissolved, and Kadiravan was thrown high into the air, crashing into the chandelier. It shattered to smithereens amid a shower of electric sparks. Kadiravan fell to the floor, blood pouring from his mouth. For a moment, he was quiet. Then he vomited more blood, and died.

Kala peered out of the room and saw Manickam's shadowy form leering over Kadiravan's body. Trembling with fright, she slammed the door shut and ran to window. "Athaan! Athaan!" she cried.

Even as she watched, the window shutters drew closed, as if someone was drawing them shut from within. She tried to reopen them, but couldn't. Then she felt the presence of someone at her back.

Manivanan, outside on the ledge, had no idea that the window had been shut. He could barely hear Kala's cries over the roar of the river.

Kala stood petrified. She heard a hushed voice from behind her. "Kala, it's me."

It was Manivanan's voice. She swung around. But it was not her husband who stood behind her; it was Manickam. She tried to scream, but not even a whisper came out.

Manickam's eyes bored into her, mesmerizingly. "Do not be scared, Kala—queen of all beauties, fount of all pleasure! Do not fear me," he whispered as he slowly came closer to her. She could not free her gaze from those hypnotizing eyes.

"I tried to taste your sweet, red lips through Padma's. But you wouldn't let me. Now I will kiss them to my heart's content."

He drew her into an embrace. At the touch of his icy hands, she gripped the edge of the table and held it hard. He took her by the chin and lowered his mouth towards hers.

Though she still held on to the table, she could feel her body quaking.

And then a miracle occurred.

The prayer book on the table moved towards her hand.

There was a flash of lightning.

She grabbed the book. Crying out, "Muruga...!" she gave Manickam a mighty shove, and flung the *Kandha Shashti Kavacham* at his face.

The book spun like a disc and ripped through Manickam's eyes.

At the same moment the windowpane crashed open and Manickam's form disappeared with a guttural scream. She stumbled to the window. Manivanan leapt into the room from the ledge and held her tight as she collapsed in his arms. As she lost consciousness, she murmured, "My Murugan saved us, Athaan... My Murugan..."

Manivanan carried her over his shoulder and bent down to pick up the prayer book. The lights went out again, and he heard an explosion in the corridor. He rushed out of the room. The roof of the corridor had caught fire from the sparks of the chandelier, and the flames were spreading. He realized that very soon the whole bungalow would go up in smoke.

He heard the rumble of a helicopter. He was about to lean through the window to wave for help… when he saw Manickam's ghost standing in front of it.

He had to signal the helicopter if they were to be saved. But he was weary; he had no strength left to do battle with a ghost.

Just then a thundering voice called out from nowhere: "Dey, Manickam!"

Manickam's ghost whipped around in a panic.

A new spectre was now visible. Manivanan was shocked to realize that he recognized the face of this spirit; it was a face he had not seen since his childhood.

It was his father.

"My dear son," said Angappan's spirit. "My dear daughter. Leave this place. Leave this place at once!"

Manickam's form started to dissolve, but Angappan attacked it. With a bloodcurdling scream, the ghost of Manickam was vaporized in a flash of light.

Just in time, Angappan's spirit had arrived to save his son and daughter-in-law from mortal peril.

The helicopter descended towards them. Manivanan leaned out, carrying Kala, and took hold of the dangling rope ladder.

Once they were safe in the helicopter and rising above the flood, Manickam looked down at the blazing bungalow.

He folded his palms and looked to the heavens, saying a silent prayer to his mother, and giving thanks to his father.

14

When Paramanayagam heard about his daughter's death, he broke down.

Three weeks later, Manivanan went through all of Angappan's papers in Kaliyaperumal's office, then announced that he wanted to keep nothing of his father's wealth. Instead, he gave a share each to the bereaved families of Kaliyaperumal, Vairappan, and Kadiravan, and donated a

substantial amount to the orphanage that Rosalyn now ran. He had to make two trips to Kuala Lumpur and Kuantan. Kala accompanied him to Vairappan's hut.

"Meenakshi, your father spoke constantly about you," Kala told his young daughter, gently caressing her cheeks. "We shall take care of your schooling and find you a good job in Singapore. Come and live with us as our daughter."

The priest was bathing the Marathandavar idol with milk. As the milk fell over the lips, he gasped aloud, "Doesn't it look like Murugan is smiling?"

"It doesn't just look like it...Murugan *is* smiling!" responded his partner.

RAJESH KUMAR

Coimbatore-based writer Rajesh Kumar currently has a bid under review by Guinness World Records to dethrone L. Ron Hubbard as the world's most published author. A mainstay on the Tamil pulp scene since his debut in the late 1960s, he has explored science fiction, romance, social-themed stories, and even non-fiction. The majority of his nearly 1500 novels, however, are crime stories.

As is common among Tamil pulp writers, Rajesh Kumar has a male-female detective duo that feature in many of his stories. But unlike Bharat and Susheela (Pattukkottai Prabakar's characters) or Vaijayanthi and Narendren (Suba's), who are perpetually in their flirtatious twenties, Rajesh Kumar's Vivek and Rubella actually end up getting married. The story here dates from just before the wedding; Rubella is at her parents' place in Bangalore and does not feature in it. Instead, Vivek is teamed up with Inspector Gokulnath of the Coimbatore Police.

The riddle of the central mystery here may be familiar to some readers, but there are plenty of wild twists and turns to keep you on your toes.

HELLO, ~~GOOD~~ DEAD MORNING!

(1986)

↯ 1 ↯

THE SHRILL RING OF THE TELEPHONE came as Vivek was huddled in his warm, thick woolen blanket, trying to beat the cold of the early dawn. Just last week, he had gone to visit the girl whom he hoped to marry, and now thoughts of her filled his head as he slept. (A moment please, readers: Last week Vivek was in Bangalore to see Rubella. Don't worry, you will be invited once the date for the marriage is fixed.)

Irritated, Vivek extracted himself from the dream-Rubella's embrace, flung off the blanket, sat up, scratched his head, and glared at the screaming phone on the bedside table.

"Black devil, why do you yell so loud? What news do you have for me this morning?" He snatched up the receiver and barked into it. "Hello, Vivek here!"

"It's Gokulnath."

"Good morning, Gokulnath."

"Sorry Vivek: 'dead morning' is more like it."

Vivek yawned loudly. "Oh boy! You have a new case, do you? Gokulnath, remember we went to Bangalore last week to see that girl?"

"Yes…"

"You remember her name?"

"Rubella, wasn't it?"

"Did you like her?"

"An apt match for you, I think."

"So you think I should go ahead with the marriage?"

"Of course!"

"Then why don't you handle this case on your own? Let me be! Morning sleep is good and sweet, like a piece of Thirunelveli halwa. So can I disconnect?"

"Vivek…"

"Yeah, tell me."

"This case is complicated."

"Is the victim a man or a woman?"

"A man."

"Age?"

"Around thirty."

"How did he die?"

"Hanging."

"Suicide?"

"I don't think so, Vivek."

"Why?"

"Come and see for yourself."

"Where should I come?"

"Do you know Indra Park, on Jail Road?"
"Yes!"
"There's a water tank in the park. That's where the body was found."
"I'll be there in half an hour, okay?"
"Fine."

Banging down the receiver, Vivek gave a long, loud yawn. *I have to wake up to death reports almost every morning*, he thought. *Miss Rubella, what will you think of me?*

Shivering in the sharp cold, he brushed his teeth, dressed and added a thick sweater, removed the canvas cover from his Honda motorcycle, kick-started it, and climbed on its back as the engine went *tud tud tud*.

As he rode through the compound gate, he turned his wrist and checked his Citizen Quartz.

6:05.

The eastern sky was just brightening. Angry red streaks of sunlight crossed the sky like whiplash scars. The speakers from the temple sang: *Margazhi Thingal madhi niraindha nannaalaam*... A crowd had already gathered at the temple for the free *sundal* and *pongal*. The road was still damp with dew from the previous night.

Vivek flew, slicing through the cold. He raced through Ram Nagar onto Lokamanya Avenue, and turned onto Dr. Nanjappa Road towards Indra Park.

Amidst the crowd, he spotted Gokulnath standing by the police jeep. He pulled the bike up beside him. The crowd parted to make way.

"Hi, Vivek," said Gokulnath.
"Where is the body?"

Gokulnath took him over to the tiny room under the water tank. "Vivek," he said softly, "this room has a single door and no windows. The walls are built with solid blocks of rock."

"Okay." Vivek rubbed his chin thoughtfully.
"The door was locked from the inside."
"Hmm..."
"Look through the keyhole, Vivek."
Vivek bent down to see.

Inside, from the iron-barred ceiling, the man hung like a straight line. A grey shirt, slightly soiled white pants. The tight noose had made his eyes bulge. His tongue stuck out from between his clenched teeth. There was a wet patch under his feet.

Vivek looked up at Gokulnath. "The door was locked from the inside, you said. So surely this is a suicide."

Gokulnath gave a grim smile. "I thought so too, at first. But now it looks like a clear-cut murder."

"Why do you think so?"

"Look at his feet Vivek. You'll understand yourself."

Vivek bent down again. His trained policeman's eyes scanned the floor beneath the man's feet, which were stiff with rigor mortis. He stood up.

"Murder," Vivek agreed.

"Tell me how you figure it."

"His feet are a foot and a half off the ground…but there is no other furniture in the room. He would have had to use a stool or a chair to hang himself from that height. So someone knocked him out and then strung him from the ceiling. And the wet patch… I guess he urinated as he was dying. But even if we agree this has to be a murder, then how did the murderer get out of the room?"

"I had the same doubt. That's why I left the body undisturbed and called you," replied Gokulnath.

Vivek fingered his chin again. The room was rock solid. There was no ventilation at all. Above the room was a water tank.

"Gokulnath?"

"Yes?"

"Looks like this one's going to be a puzzler, eh?" Vivek's forehead was already sweating.

2

The blue Pallavan bus spat out Nirmalkumar at the bus stop and drove away. He waved off the black smoke from the engine and crossed the road to his office.

Nirmalkumar was twenty-five. Well-built, reasonably tall, fair, with close-cropped curly hair, a thick moustache, and a squarish face; a clean line of teeth, unstained by nicotine, made every woman colleague fall for him. He had worked for the past two years as a service engineer for Vishnu Refrigerators, lived with his father, had successfully gotten his elder sister married, and was currently planning his younger sister Chandra's wedding. He himself had his eye on Mangaleswari, the woman who came to clean the office telephones. His father Raghu had handed over the responsibilities of the house to his only son, and spent his time these days reading his neighbours' copies of *The Hindu* and *Dhinamani*.

Ignoring the saluting watchman, Nirmalkumar walked past the shiny company signboard and entered the building.

Iniya, the receptionist, was sitting in her glass-walled cubicle behind a semicircular table, wearing her usual heavy makeup. On seeing Nirmalkumar, she lisped, "Mr. Nirmal…"

Nirmalkumar stopped mid-stride, approached her, and said, "Yes?"

"The G.M. wanted to see you as soon as you got in."

"Is he here?"

"He came in at nine."

"I didn't see his car in the parking lot."

"He's sent it to the shop for service."

"Is he free now?"

"One moment, let me check." She whispered into the intercom, barely moving her painted lips. "Mr. Nirmalkumar just got in. Can I send him to your room?… Thank you, sir." She put down the phone, turned to Nirmalkumar, and said, "He's waiting for you."

Nirmalkumar walked swiftly across the mosaic floor to the cabin at the end of the hall. *Why would the G.M. want to see me?* he wondered.

Preoccupied, he came to the laminated door, which bore a plastic board with the words CHANDRACHUDAN, GENERAL MANAGER. He knocked gently: *Tok tok!*

"Yes…come in!"

He pushed open the door and entered. The whirring air conditioner bathed him in its coolness.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Nirmal. Please have a seat." Chandrachudan, the man pointing to the chair, was young—no older than Nirmal. His daily quota of beer had given his face a rosy shade. He wore a white shirt tucked into his black pants, and had unsuccessfully tried to pull back his paunch with a tight belt. He had sharp eyes, spectacles, and unruly hair.

Nirmalkumar sank into the cushioned chair. "So, Nirmal," Chandrachudan asked, "are there any fridges that need your service today?"

"Yes sir."

"Who are the customers?"

"First Alamelu Vaikundam of Rahman Sait Colony called—three times. Her fridge isn't cooling enough. Then Dhanalakshmi Rajagopal from Tea Garden Street called, with the same complaint."

"Will you be through with those by noon?"

"Sorry, sir. I think both are major faults. I might have to change the coils…so it might take till evening."

"Say by five in the evening?"

"Hmm… Yes, maybe…"

"Can you come straight to my bungalow after that?"

"For what, sir?"

"My a/c unit is not functioning properly. I think you can set it right."

"Sure!"

"Sorry for the disturbance…"

"Oh, it's no trouble. I'll be there at five sharp. You'll be at home, won't you?"

"Yes."

When Nirmalkumar stepped out of the cooled room, the heat hit him hard. As he moved towards the refrigeration workshop behind the offices, the telephone operator beckoned him.

"Nirmal, there's a call for you."

"Me?"

"Yes. A woman on the line."

A woman, for me? he wondered as he took the receiver from her.

"Hello?"

"Anna? Is that you?" It was Chandra, his younger sister, sounding very tense.

"Yes, it's me. Chandra?"

"Nirmal Anna, please, you've got to come! Appa has had a heart attack. I took him to Dr. Ranganathan. He wants to admit him immediately."

Nirmalkumar stood there shocked, hardly noticing as the receiver slipped from his grasp.

3

Crowds were bustling around the water tank in Indra Park. The passengers waiting at Thiruvalluvar Bus Station on their way out of town were postponing their trips to visit the park and see what all the fuss was about. The cops were trying to chase them off using lathis and curses.

Two men were working on breaking down the thick door of the room. Vivek was questioning the watchman.

"What's your name?"

"Ramasami."

"You're in charge of the park? And the water tank?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Ten years."

"Do you know that a man has been found murdered, hanging in the room under the tank?"

"Aiya, I was off for the past four days. I went to Sundakkamuthur for a family function. I left the park gate keys with my nephew Sammuvam and returned by the early morning bus. I tried the door this morning and it wouldn't open. I knocked several times before peeping in through the keyhole. At once, I ran to the ice factory over there and called the inspector..." The old man was shivering with fear, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Where is Sammuvam now?" asked Vivek, rubbing his palms together vigorously.

"I don't know. I have no clue where that idiotic boozard has disappeared to these past four days. He hadn't even locked the park gates!"

"Is there anyone else working in this park?"

"There's a woman who comes to sweep twice a week. Her name is Kuppamma."

"Is she here in the crowd?" Vivek asked, pointing to the gathered people.

"No. She usually comes after seven."

"Where does your nephew live?"

"In Sanganur Medu."

"Will you go and fetch him?"

"Yes, aiya."

"Come back at once."

The old man nodded and left, cursing his nephew under his breath.

"We've got the door open, sir," a constable whispered from behind Vivek. "But it stinks in there. It's difficult to get close to the body; it's begun to decompose."

"Gokulnath, let's go," Vivek called out, covering his nose with his handkerchief. The stench hit him anyway, through the cloth. "He must have been dead at least three days. We should have called for formalin."

"I'll do that right away."

Inside the room, they brought the man down from the noose. Pieces of rotted flesh oozed from the ripped skin around his neck. His eyes were swollen beyond belief. Vivek walked around the body, his kerchief still held tightly to his nose. There seemed to be no open wounds.

"Gokulnath, can you ask one of your men to check the pockets?"

Gokulnath gave an authoritative look, and a constable stepped up. He felt in the dead man's shirt and pants pockets. Finally he handed over a wallet to Vivek. The wallet was of very fine leather. Inside it were a ten-rupee note, a soiled one-rupee note, and a fairly new fifty-paise coin. Vivek looked through every compartment in the wallet till he finally found a single rectangular visiting card.

4

Nadia was filling her TVS moped with fuel at a petrol bunk a few yards past the Cooperative State Bank of India when she heard a car honk behind her.

From the white Dolphin, she heard three cheerful voices call, "Hey Nadia!"

All three girls were in their twenties. One was dressed in a *churidar*, another in a *salwar kameez*. Only the third, as the lone custodian of the great Tamil culture, was wearing a sari. All three were heavily made-up and smiled through thickly painted lips.

"We're just coming from your place."

"My place?" asked Nadia, wrinkling her pretty forehead. "But why?"

"Pay up your petrol bill and come over here," replied the girl in the salwar, winking naughtily.

Still confused, Nadia went up to the glass counter and paid her bill for two litres of petrol. The jeans hugging her waist and the well-fitted T-shirt bearing the slogan WE TWO, OURS TWO showed off her curves beautifully.

"What are you pestering me for?" she asked as she approached the Dolphin.

The girl in the churidar took a quick look around before whispering, "I have a hot video. Shall we watch it?"

"Where did you get it from?"

"What do you care where I got it from? Do you want to see it?"

"When…?"

"Now, of course!"

"Aren't we supposed to be in college?"

"Phoo! Let's cut today's class."

"Whose house do we go to?"

"Ragini's," said the one in salwar, pointing to the girl in the sari.

"What? Her mother will be there…"

"No *yaar*, her mom left to Trichy last night for a family function. Her dad won't be back from work till after five, and she has the house key."

Nadia bit her nails nervously.

"So what's your problem now?"

"Nothing... It's just that I have a practical today. The chemistry professor is my brother's best friend. I'm scared he'll tell on me if I'm absent."

"Don't worry so much, *di*. Besides, I can only keep the cassette till this evening."

"How long is the film?"

"A hundred and eighty minutes. Three full hours!"

"So it should be done around one in the afternoon?"

"For sure. You can go to college after lunch. We'll go ahead; you follow on your moped."

"Hmm..."

"Listen, no one is forcing you, okay?"

"Oh no... I want to come." She dashed to her moped, but a raging feeling of guilt came over her. Lately, the urge to watch *those* films had been increasing. She had seen her first such film three months ago, one evening at Ragini's house. Since then she had felt a feverish desire that she didn't quite know how to handle.

Should I go or stay away? After some internal debate, she decided, *I'll go—but this will be the last time. After this I swear I'll never even think of such things again.*

Chee! I forgot to ask them—I wonder what country this new cassette is from.

Ten minutes later they had all reached Ragini's bungalow in Ashok Nagar. They parked in the broad portico and entered.

"Where is it?" asked Nadia eagerly.

"Wait..."

"Have you seen it already?"

"Not yet!"

"So how do you know it's good?"

"Tony told me."

"Who's Tony?"

The three girls burst into laughter. "Poor Nadia," giggled the girl in

the salwar. "Let me tell her. Ragini has been seeing a young man named Tony for the last six months. He's the one who gave her this cassette."

Ignoring her look of disbelief, the three friends dragged her upstairs. One of them shut the door; the other connected the VCR to the television. The third was busy closing all the windows and latching them.

"Did you lock the front door?" asked the salwar girl.

"Of course I did. What a question!" Ragini replied with a smirk.

The four girls crowded onto the sofa in front of the television. The screen glowed with silver lines for a second before the Swedish cassette came alive. Every single frame was explicit.

The four girls stared at the screen as if they were ready to swallow it whole. When they couldn't control their excitement any longer, they sipped on iced orange juice from the fridge.

The cassette was halfway through when the doorbell screamed.

The four girls looked at each other and gulped.

"Who's that, Ragini?"

"No idea!"

"Go see…"

"No, wait!" said another. "Switch off the television and hide the cassette before you open the door!"

While the girl in the salwar cleared the room, Ragini went down to open the door.

5

The back of the visiting card that Vivek held was printed with shiny red letters. In the left corner it read: ILLANGO, SALES MANAGER, followed by an address in very fine print. Vivek had to look closely to read it. 745, THEEN MURTHI NAGAR, VIII CROSS, BELLARY.

"Bellary? Isn't that in Andhra?" Vivek asked Gokulnath.

"Yes, close to Guntakal."

"Did he come all this way just to die? Gokulnath, keep this card. Try and hurry with the post-mortem report. Only after we know whether it's a murder or a suicide will we know how to proceed."

Vivek left the room. Gokulnath barked some rapid orders at his constables and then followed him.

Vivek walked over to a tea stall a short distance away from the water tank. The stall owner, who wore a thick smear of sandalwood paste on his forehead, became anxious when he saw Gokulnath's uniform and Vivek's air of authority.

Vivek sat on the wooden bench in front of the shop.

"Nair, two teas please," he said.

"Right away, *saarey*!"

As he began to make fresh tea, Vivek asked him, "What's your name?"

"Krishnan Nair."

"You heard about the man they found dead in the room under the water tank?"

"Yes, saarey."

"What do you know about that old watchman?"

"You mean Ramasami?"

"Mm-hmm."

"He's a bad man, saarey…"

"Why do you say so?"

"There's a lot of shady activity that goes on in this park at night. After about ten P.M., Ramasami rents out that room under the tank for couples. The policeman who comes on night rounds gets a cut."

Vivek turned to Gokulnath and gave him a look. "That's new!" said Vivek.

Nair laughed aloud.

"Practically all the night cases around here use that room like a cheap lodge. The chap who died probably brought a woman with him, too. Maybe they had a quarrel that turned bad."

"What about the watchman's nephew, Sammuvam?"

"He's an alcoholic, saarey. If he lays his hands on some money, he'll drink till the last pie is gone. Then you'll find him in some gutter." Nair took two empty glasses, rinsed them in hot water, filled them with fresh decoction, and presented Vivek and Gokulnath with frothing hot teas.

Vivek took a sip and looked around the area. There was a building a little beyond the water tank.

"What's that building there?"

"It's an ice factory, saarey."

"Who does it belong to?"

"It belongs to a Seth by the name of Gupta. It gets very busy during summer. But the rest of the year, he only visits the factory once a week." Nair stopped suddenly to watch a woman in the distance, who was walking towards the park. "Saarey...that's the woman who cleans the park. She brings her own clients here some nights, too."

Both Gokulnath and Vivek turned to look at the woman. She was about thirty years old, chewing on betel leaves and spitting occasionally—*pulich!* She was dressed in a faded nylon sari and a red blouse that did not match it. Her kohl-lined eyes sparkled with a keen look of business. Imitation jewels adorned her nose and ears.

Gokulnath called over one of the constables controlling the crowd and whispered, "Bring that woman over here."

When she came over, Gokulnath questioned her sternly, "What's your name?"

She looked up at them nervously. "K-K-Kuppamma..."

"Do you work in this park?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Have you come to look at the dead man in the room below the water tank? Or didn't you know about it?"

"*Aiyyo!* What are you talking about? I just came to check if the old man Ramasami was back at work."

"When did you last come to work?"

"Three days ago."

"Do you know the man who died?"

"No! I didn't know anyone had died there at all!"

"Go take a look."

She made her way through the thronging crowd. After a few minutes, she emerged again, sweating and shivering.

"So, you've seen him before?"

"Yes!"

6

When Nirmalkumar heard about his father's heart attack, he didn't know what to do. He rushed back to the G.M.'s office, got permission to leave, and was hurrying out of the office just as Mangaleswari entered with her telephone-cleaning kit. It was a Friday, and her face was gleaming gold from being washed with turmeric paste. A white rose decorated her loosely plaited wet hair.

"Good morning," she greeted him cheerfully.

Nirmalkumar gave a grim smile. "Sorry...I'm in no shape to wish you so in return, Miss Mangaleswari. I just had a call that my father is unwell."

The look of joy on her face vanished in an instant. She wrinkled her forehead and gave him a searching look. "What's wrong?"

"Heart attack... My sister called. I'm leaving now." He walked towards the car park.

"Wait a second..."

"Yes?"

"Can I come along? To see your father?"

He looked at her for a moment, puzzled, and then said, "If you want to."

"Thank you!"

They both came out together and got in an auto-rickshaw at the street corner, not bothering to bargain about the rate.

"Is this your father's first attack?" asked Mangaleswari as they rode.

"Yes."

"I hope no one will think badly of me, coming along with you like this."

"Of course not."

Fifteen minutes later, the auto came to a stop in front of a tiled house in Ayanavaram. At once, Chandra ran out towards them.

"Chandra, how is Appa?"

"He's all right now. The doctor has given him a shot." Though Chandra—a slim, fair girl who resembled the film actress Nalini—was addressing her brother, her eyes were pinned on Mangaleswari.

When Nirmalkumar entered the living room, his father Ramalingam was seated on the easy chair reading a full-page advertisement in *Dhinathandhi*.

"Appa, are you okay?"

"Come in." Ramalingam folded the paper, put it away, and smiled. "I told her not to get you all panicked. But she wouldn't listen to me."

"Appa, a heart attack is no laughing matter! Get up, let's go to the hospital and have a thorough checkup done."

"Yes, yes, we'll go later in the evening. These things are normal at my age. It's just god sending a 'show cause' notice. I'd better start getting ready for the final call!"

"How can you be so blasé about this?" Nirmalkumar protested. "Let's go to Rao Hospital at once."

"This old man can wait," said Ramalingam. "Who's this new girl you've brought home?"

It was only then Nirmalkumar even remembered Mangaleswari's presence. He slapped his forehead and introduced her to his father.

"Welcome, Mangaleswari!" Ramalingam gave her a thorough look, up and down. "Please, sit down."

"You're very kind, sir."

"Listen, you don't have to be all proper around me. As long as you speak respectfully, it's enough."

"Yes, sir."

"And your parents?"

"Only my mother is with me."

"Are you the eldest girl at home?"

"I'm an only daughter."

"What's your education?"

"B.Sc."

"Please don't mistake me for asking you this, but if you've studied up to B.Sc. then why did you settle for this position as a telephone sanitizer?"

"I couldn't find any other work. The pay's not great, but it's a peaceful job."

Ramalingam turned to Chandra. "She has come to our house for the first time. Get her some coffee or buttermilk."

"Please, no thanks," said Mangaleswari. "I came to see how you were. We were both very worried. Here you are sitting and happily chatting. I am very relieved."

Chandra went into the kitchen. Mangaleswari followed her in, still murmuring, "Please, don't!"

Ramalingam winked at Nirmalkumar. "Your selection is fantastic, Nirmal. I'm glad you didn't miss this chance to introduce me to my future daughter-in-law!"

"Appa!"

"Don't 'Appa' me... I was once your age, you know. Wait until Chandra's wedding is done. Then we will begin work on yours, okay?"

7

Vivek gaped at Kuppamma for a second. "You know him?"

"Mm-hmm."

"How?"

"Three days back, I saw him sitting here alone in the park in the evening. He looked educated, well-off... I thought I'd try my luck. But he wouldn't respond."

"What did you ask him and what did he say?"

She hesitated, even looked a bit shy.

"Speak up, woman!"

"Aiya, don't judge me, please. I sell my body to survive. Everyone knows that all kinds of things happen in this park. I usually try to pick somebody up by around eight o'clock. So that evening, I was trying my luck with him."

"So, what did he say?"

"He snapped at me. 'Chee, get lost,' he said. I tried to ask what town he was from, but he wouldn't answer. So I left him alone."

"And then...?"

"When I was leaving to go home, I noticed Sammuvam talking to him."

"You didn't come to work the next day?"

"No. I've been off for three days. Today I just came to check if that old man Ramasami was back."

"Tell us about Sammuvam."

"Sammuvam? A thief and a drunkard! He has to visit the prison at least once a year, or else he can't digest his food."

A cycle rickshaw screeched to a halt and Ramasami got down from it, along with a lean, dark man.

"There, aiya," Kuppamma said, "Sammuvam has come. That one's capable of doing anything for money. Whack him in the knees a couple of times and you'll find out how that man died."

Sammuvam stood unsteadily, trying to focus his eyes, which were reddened by cheap hooch, on both Gokulnath and Vivek.

8

Ragini's heart hammered in her chest—*dhik, dhik*—as she hurriedly opened the front door.

It was Santhamurthi, her father, loosening his tie and removing his spectacles. His bald pate shone with sweat.

"Appa…" she took a step back in shock. He looked equally puzzled.

"What are you doing at home? Didn't you go to college?"

It wasn't as if deceit always came naturally to Ragini, but somehow she managed to quickly form a coherent lie.

"A student in college died in a traffic accident, so we closed for the day. My friends and I thought we could come here and watch some films. Er, why are you back so early, Appa?"

"I felt a little feverish. I took off and came home to rest."

"Do you want a pill or something?"

"No, I think I just need to relax a bit. What film were you girls watching? If it's a good one, I wouldn't mind joining you."

"Aiyaiyyo!"

"What's wrong? Why are you shouting?"

"It's a horror film, Appa. You wouldn't like it. You said you had a fever… You'd better go to your room and relax."

"Who else is there with you upstairs?"

"Nadia, Monika, and Geetha."

"Fine, I'll be in my room. Give me a call for lunch, okay?"

"Yes, Appa."

Santhamurthi unbuttoned his shirt as he walked into his room. Ragini sprang up the stairs like a calf cut from its tether. The other three girls were waiting for her at the doorway.

"Who was that?"

"My dad!"

"*What?*" three voices asked in hushed unison.

"Don't worry, di. He's not coming up. We can lock the door and keep watching."

"That's risky," gasped Nadia. "If he suddenly decides to come in, we'll get caught."

"He wouldn't do that!"

"You watch, if you're so sure. I'm leaving." Nadia got ready to go. The girl in the churidar caught her wrist.

"So you're too chicken to watch the film in this house, is that right, Nadia?"

"Yes…"

"Then let's go to your house. Your brother won't be back till evening, and we can leave before then."

Nadia thought for a moment. Ragini gently nudged her shoulder.

"What's your problem? You don't have parents to worry about; you don't even have any other relatives in town. And you're not expecting anyone else to come home. We can watch in peace. What do you say? Shall we go?"

Nadia nodded silently.

9

Vivek looked Sammuvam over.

His eyes were bloodshot and clouded, like two ponds that a herd of buffaloes had just sloshed through, kicking up the mud. He seemed like

he was about to float away in the breeze; Ramasami held him down by his arms.

As they approached Gokulnath and Vivek, Sammuvam raised his palms high in the air and greeted them as if he were praying to Lord Perumal.

"Aiya, hello…"

Vivek stepped aside. "Are you drunk, man?" Gokulnath demanded.

"I drank last night, *saar*."

"Where have you been the last four days?"

"I was at home, down with a fever, saar."

"You know about the man who died in the room beneath the water tank?"

"I heard… my *maama* told me."

"Go have a look."

Ramasami helped Sammuvam walk to the room. He returned cursing.

"Why did that bastard have to choose my park to die in? Why couldn't he find a good strong tamarind tree to hang himself from?"

Gokulnath rose, looking intimidating in his uniform. "Dey, tell me the truth. What did you do to that man?"

"I did nothing, saar!"

"Weren't you talking with him just three days ago?"

"Who told you that?"

"What does it matter who told me? Did you or did you not talk with him?"

"I said just a few words, saar…"

"And what did you say?"

"I told him it was time for me to close the park, and he had to leave. He gave me five rupees and begged me to let him sleep under some tree for the night. I felt sorry for him, so I said, 'Hey, you'll freeze to death if you sleep out in the cold. Go and sleep in the room there.' I took the money, drank my quota, and went home. The next day I came down with a raging fever. I couldn't even open my eyes. When my uncle told me that some guy had died in the park, I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach."

Vivek cut in, "Did the man have a suitcase with him?"

"No, saar."

"What time did he come to the park?"

"Around five or six."

"Was there anyone with him?"

"No one, saar. He came alone. He sat by himself, plucking the grass once in a while, or staring vacantly at the sky. There was something bothering him. Now he's dragged me into his troubles, that cursed man..."

"Sammuvam." Vivek snapped his fingers. "Have you seen the room under the water tank?"

"What kind of a question is that? Of course I have."

"What would somebody need to hang himself in that room?"

Sammuvam thought hard and spoke his words one by one. "He would need a rope to hang from the ceiling...and a stool..."

"Was there a stool in the room?"

Sammuvam's face went pale. "No...nothing except the ceiling."

"Then how did he hang himself? He's hanging two feet from the floor."

"Perhaps someone killed him and hung him?" replied Sammuvam.

"But the door was locked from the inside. So how did the other person get out?"

Sammuvam's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

10

There was a fire burning in Nadia's body; the effect of watching the rest of the video in her room was still raging. Ragini and her other two friends had left with the cassette at five in the evening, promising to meet at college the next day.

Nadia stood under a cold shower for an hour and cooled down a bit. When she stepped out on the portico, the telephone in the living room rang.

It was her older brother, Chandrachudan.

"Hello? Anna?" said Nadia. "It's almost six. Haven't you left your office yet?"

"I won't be back till eight. My friend Lokanathan has come down from Thirupur. I'm taking him to Mount Road to buy some typewriters for his institute."

"That will take till eight?"

"Not just that—we have a lot to catch up on."

"Will you be home for dinner?"

"No. We're going to Amaravathi afterwards."

"Are you bringing your friend home?"

"No, he's leaving tonight by the Blue Mountain Express. I'll see him off at the station and then come back. You have your dinner and go to bed."

"Yes, Anna."

"Oh Nadia—I almost forgot. A technician from the office will be coming to check on the a/c machines. So help him around, will you?"

"Yes, Anna."

She put down the receiver when a voice called from behind, "Nadia Amma…" It was Kalyani, the cook.

"Yes Kalyani, are you done for the day?"

"Yes, amma."

"What's for dinner tonight?"

"Chapati and peas kurma. I've set the dining table too."

"Then you can leave."

Once the cook left, Nadia went to Chandrachudan's room, took a Chase novel from the bookshelf, and returned to the living room. She sat on the sofa, mechanically flipping the pages of the book, while the images from the cassette she had seen earlier whirled through her mind. As she mentally replayed every scene, her body heated up again. Hours passed. By eight, she was a steaming bowl of soup.

Krrrrrr krrrrrr went the doorbell. She threw aside her book and opened the door. There stood a young man.

"Yes?"

"Madam, I'm Nirmalkumar—I'm a service technician in your brother's company. He asked me to fix the a/c machines here. I'm sorry I'm so late; I got delayed at my last job. If you don't mind, I'll go ahead and check now. Or else I can come early tomorrow."

"Oh no, please fix it now! It's too hot to sleep without the a/c. Come in."

He stepped into the room. Nadia allowed him to walk in as she shut and locked the front door, her eyes fixed on his broad chest.

"You work in my brother's company?" she asked. "How come I've never seen you before?"

"I don't work in the office, madam. I go out on calls when customers have problems, to service their machines. You're the G.M.'s sister, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm Nadia."

"Isn't the G.M. at home?"

"No...he should be back soon."

Nirmalkumar hesitated. "If your brother isn't home, maybe I should come back tomorrow, when he's here."

"Oh, he'll be home soon. You go ahead with your job."

"Where is the a/c unit?"

"Come, I'll show you."

"What's the problem with it?"

"It switches off suddenly, and sometimes there's a burning smell."

"I'll try to fix it now. If I can't, I'll come back tomorrow."

"Oh please don't say that, Nirmal. You must set it right tonight! Start with the one in my bedroom."

She took him to her room. Nirmalkumar set his toolbox on the writing table and switched on the a/c to try to see what was making it sick. It began to hum smoothly.

"It seems fine to me," he said and turned round.

What he saw shocked him!

Nadia was lying on the bed, her chest half exposed. Her dress had ridden up above her knees to reveal her calves.

"What, Nirmal, aren't you going to do your job?"

"I, uh, think I've forgotten an important tool. I'll come back tomorrow."

"Wait, Nirmal. Come back tomorrow and check the a/c. Tonight you check *me* out."

"What do you mean, madam?" Nirmalkumar's voice quavered.

"What are you scared of, Nirmal? Come, sit by me. And stop calling me 'madam.' I'm Nadia. My brother won't be back for an hour. Nirmal... Have you ever touched a young woman's body?"

"Madam, this is wrong..."

"There's nothing wrong with sex, Nirmal. If everybody thought like that, no one would get born in the first place." She reached out and grasped his strong arm. Her eyes were brimming with lust. "I've been burning with desire all day."

"Madam, this is the house of my employer. This is where my bread comes from."

"You don't get it for free; you slog for it. Let's not waste precious time talking philosophy, Nirmal. Sit on the bed."

"No, I can't!"

He shut his toolbox and walked swiftly out of the room. As he reached for the doorknob, he heard her angry voice from behind him.

"Nirmal!" she shouted. She had ripped the front of her nightdress and her hair was all in disarray. "If you take one more step, I'll start screaming. I'll claim you raped me. In a second, I'll have all the neighbours on my front step. I'll lie, of course; I'll say that I innocently brought you to my bedroom to check the a/c machine, but you overpowered me. A woman's word will never be challenged, Nirmal, even if she tells a barefaced lie."

Nirmalkumar was speechless.

"Come back, Nirmal. Just be with me for half an hour. That'll do. Then I won't speak about this ever again."

Nirmalkumar slowly walked towards her.

"That's a good boy. Come closer."

"I'm scared, madam..."

"Of what? My brother? You can leave before he gets here."

They went back into the bedroom. She gently nudged him to the bed.

"Mm, you have a fabulous body! Do you work out every day?"

"Uh..."

"Can I take off your shirt?" Her fingers were ripping open the buttons.

"I shouldn't be doing this..." he said, worriedly. "You might be married soon."

"You don't have to worry about my marriage. This is just between the two of us. Do you want me to switch off the light? Or shall I leave it on?"

"Please, no!"

"No what?"

"This isn't—"

"Oh, stop being stubborn and slip off my nightdress."

Outside, on the portico, a car came to a halt.

Nadia, who had Nirmalkumar wrapped in a tight embrace, her fingers caressing his back, suddenly shoved him aside and sat up. She ran to peek out of the window. Chandrachudan was turning his key in the lock of the front door.

Fear surged through her. When she turned round to stare at Nirmalkumar an instant later, her expression had completely changed.

"You cursed man!" she yelled. "Had I known what a creep you were, I'd never have let you into the house!'

Nirmalkumar leapt up as if he had been stung. "What do you mean, madam?"

"Get away from me, you leech!"

She toppled a couple of pieces of furniture and flung the books on the table at him. Then she rushed to the bedroom door, banged it open, ran out to the living room, and fell into Chandrachudan's arms, weeping.

"Anna..."

"What happened, Nadia?"

"The technician you sent to service the a/c... He..."

Chandrachudan looked at her ripped dress. Drops of sweat gathered on his forehead and his stomach tightened in fury. He pushed Nadia aside and raced up the stairs as if he was on fire. Inside he saw Nirmalkumar hastily buttoning up his shirt.

"You rascal!" he pounced on Nirmalkumar.

"Sir—" Before he could get any further, a blow landed, strong enough to rattle every feature on his face. As Nirmalkumar gaped in surprise, a

kick hit him in the groin. He sank to floor with no time to cry out in pain. As he fell, a boot crashed down on his head.

"Anna, leave him, please," wept Nadia, as she tried to stop him.

"You move aside. How dare he lay a finger on you! I'll break his hands!" Saying this, he gave Nirmalkumar two more heavy kicks.

Nirmalkumar held up his bloodied hands. "Sir, please, listen to me…" he begged.

"Shut up! If hear another word out of you, I'll completely lose it. Fucking bastard, if it wasn't for me you wouldn't have food to eat! And you want to try to mess with my sister, do you? I won't allow you to walk out of here alive. Die!" He stomped his boot down on Nirmalkumar's neck.

Nirmalkumar gave a strangled cry. Blood ran out of his gaping mouth.

"Anna," sobbed Nadia. "Please stop. You might kill him!"

"So let him die!" Chandrachudan ground his teeth, his face red. He pressed his foot down harder.

"*Kuk… kuk… kuk.*" Nirmalkumar gave a strangled gasp, let a puddle of blood ooze out of his mouth, and then went limp. Chandrachudan removed his foot from the limp throat. Wiping his brow, he turned to Nadia.

"What time did this rascal come here?"

"Half an hour back…"

"He must have found out you were alone!"

"Anna…"

"What?"

"I think he's dead…"

Chandrachudan's anger came down a notch, and the blazing fire within him began to abate. A strange fear crept over him. He bent over Nirmalkumar, now sprawled on the ground with his mouth open and his eyes half shut. Gently he touched the tip of the cold rigid nose with the back of his hand, then quickly withdrew in shock, murmuring to himself.

"He *is* dead…"

11

The doctor's room was quiet.

Vivek and Gokulnath sat fingering their chins, deep in thought. Dr. Vaseegan, the dean of the General Hospital, said again, in a firm voice, "This is a perfect suicide... No doubt about it."

"How is it possible, doctor?" asked Gokulnath.

"The report is clear. I supervised the post-mortem myself. The pressure on the larynx is obvious. There was a dribble of saliva on the chin, which confirms my opinion. The spinal cord is torn near the neck. It's a suicide."

"Someone could have walloped him to death," Vivek interrupted, "and then strung him from the ceiling. The symptoms would be the same."

"Of course they wouldn't," scoffed the doctor. "If the chap was already dead before he was hanged, there'd be no saliva. Also the rope marks would be different. It's all very clear from the body."

"But doctor, how is it possible for a man to hang himself in a room that has no furniture for him to kick off from?"

"I agree, it's very confusing."

"There was nothing in that room," Vivek persisted.

"Was there a window?"

"No, just one strong door,"

"Tell me, when you first saw the body, how high were the feet from the ground?"

"About a foot and a half."

"Hmm...strange. Do you know his name?"

"There was a visiting card in his wallet that had the name Illango, with a Bellary address."

"Have you made inquiries there?"

"Gokulnath and I are leaving this evening. We hope to find some clues."

12

Chandrachudan's fury had drained away, and his eyes were now filled with distress. Nadia was whimpering in a corner.

"Why Anna? Why did you go on hitting him when I kept begging you to stop?"

Chandrachudan looked around the room cautiously. "Nadia, is there anyone else in the house?"

"No..."

"What about the maid?"

"She left at six."

"Is the front door locked?"

"No."

"You stay here. I'll go lock it."

Chandrachudan was just shutting the door when Thyagarajan, his neighbour, called from his front door. "Hello, Chandrachudan, did you have a fight with your sister? I thought I heard Nadia screaming."

"We were just goofing around."

"That silly girl! She had me worried with all her yelling. I was about to come over to see what was going on."

Chandrachudan gave him a tight smile, then switched off the lights in the portico and the living room, and shut the door.

Nadia stood, frozen like a statue, staring down at Nirmalkumar's body.

"Nadia..."

"Mm?"

"Did anyone see him come in?"

"Nobody."

"Why are you looking so scared? Be brave!"

"Anna, you've murdered a man! How can I be brave? What if the police come and arrest you?"

"They'll only come if they find out."

"What do you mean?"

"Nadia, listen. I killed a man who was trying to rape you. I had no premeditated intention to murder him. We'll clean this up."

"How?"

"After eleven tonight, I'll bring the car to the back of the house. We'll stuff him in the back and discard his body on the railway tracks out in the suburbs. He'll be crushed to pieces by a train."

"What if someone recognizes him?"

"What if they do? The police will think he died on the tracks. No one will connect it to us."

"Anna, I'm scared…"

"About what?" Just then the telephone jangled, loud and harsh. "Go see who that is."

Nadia picked up the receiver and said, in a trembling voice, "Hello?"

"This is Chandra speaking. I'm Nirmalkumar's sister."

Nadia broke out in a fresh sweat. She covered the receiver with her palm and whispered, "Anna, it's a woman named Chandra. Says she's Nirmalkumar's sister."

"Give me the phone," said Chandrachudan, snatching it from her. "Hello, who's this?"

"Sir, this is Chandra, Nirmalkumar's sister. Is my brother there?"

"No, he's not."

"Really? He told us he was going there."

"Coming here? Why?"

"He said you had asked him to check on an a/c unit. He got delayed and didn't leave until eight."

"Oh, right… He hasn't come yet; perhaps he's on his way. If he does come, I'll tell him you called. Is it anything urgent?"

"Well, my father is having chest pains again. We're going to admit him to the hospital. Will you tell my brother, please?"

"Oh dear! Is there anyone there to help you? Do you want me to send someone?"

"No sir, I'll take him to the hospital myself. Just inform my brother, please."

"Will he know which hospital to come to?"

"Yes, sir."

"If he comes here, I'll send him to the hospital immediately. And if you need anything else, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you, sir."

Chandrachudan cut the call.

"What happened, Anna?"

"His sister knew he was coming here. We'll have to dispose of him quickly."

"You're going to do it right now?"

"No, it's too risky. I'll do it after ten."

They sat down to wait.

13

Bellary was an ancient-looking town. Half the population spoke Kannada and the other half Telugu. Massive cut-outs of the film stars Rajkumar and Chiranjeevi, festooned with dried garlands, towered in front of the cinema halls. The cycle rickshaw-wala pedaled quickly through the tiny, crowded streets of the bazaar, ringing his bell. Vivek and Gokulnath, dressed in dhotis and shirts, sat enjoying the ride. It was five in the evening.

"*Theen Murti Nagarlo endho number cross road, sir?*" the rickshaw-wala asked in Telugu, to which Gokulnath answered in Tamil, "*Eighth Cross.*"

"*Door numberu?*"

Gokulnath gave him the number. The rickshaw sped on.

Theen Murti Nagar was exactly three kilometres outside of Bellary. Brand new buildings gleamed with white paint. At a distance, one could see Bellary Rock Fort and the Central Prison. The first and second cross roads sliced through the main road. Finally they came to Eighth Cross Road, with its rows of uniform housing units teeming with people. At every doorstep there were children playing and women sitting, watching the moving rickshaw with curiosity.

After a ten-minute ride, they arrived at Number 745. There was a name board on the front door that announced ILLANGO in English

letters. A little girl sucking on a mango at the doorstep saw the rickshaw come to a halt and swiftly sprinted into the house, yelling, "*Amma, yevaro ochinnaaru…!*"

Vivek and Gokulnath got down from the rickshaw and took a step towards the house, when a woman barged out. She was dark and slim, with a huge stud in her nose.

"Is this Mr. Illango's house?" asked Vivek.

The woman clearly knew Tamil, for she said "Yes."

"We're from Coimbatore. We need to ask a few questions about him."

Immediately the woman's expression changed. "What do you need to ask? Who are you?"

"We're from the police department."

"What's this about?"

"Where is he now?"

"At his office."

Vivek and Gokulnath gave each other a look, and then turned back to her.

"So when will he be back?"

"In another ten minutes. What do you need to talk to him for? Has he done something wrong?"

"Do you have a photograph of your husband?"

"Yes, come in…"

She took them in, seated them on a sofa, and pointed to a photograph on the wall.

"Here's a photo of both of us."

"That's Illango?"

"Yes."

"Where does he work?"

"At Bellary Chemical Company. He's a sales manager."

"Does he go out of town often?

"Sure he does; he's away almost two weeks every month. He's leaving for Bangalore in a couple of days."

As she finished, a scooter came to a stop at the front door. In half a minute, Illango entered, looking at Vivek and Gokulnath in confusion.

"These men are with the police," she explained. "They're from Madras. They say they have to talk to you."

He looked puzzled, but gave them a cautious "Hello."

"Is this your visiting card?" asked Vivek.

"Yes, it's mine. But where did you get it?"

"Please be patient," Vivek said, and looked to Gokulnath, who opened the brown envelope and displayed the photographs.

"Did you know this man in the photos?" Gokulnath asked.

Startled, Illango gaped at the photo of the body hanging a foot and a half from the ground, then at another of the body laid out on the floor. Looked more and more terrified, he finally gasped, "Who is this, sir?"

"You tell us. We found your visiting card in his wallet."

Illango ripped off his spectacles and peered closer at the photographs. "He had my visiting card? I can't even recognize his face!"

"The body had started to decompose. Try looking carefully."

At Vivek's behest, Illango tried again, then gave up. "I'm sorry sir. I have no idea who this is. It's tough to tell from these pictures. But listen, I'm a sales manager, so I meet lots of new people every day. It's difficult to remember them all. Give me a few days, maybe it will come to me. I only printed this card a week ago. I couldn't have given it to more than about thirty people. So give me your Madras number—and some more time. I'm sure I'll get it in a couple of days."

14

As Chandrachudan stepped on the accelerator, he stole a glance at his wristwatch.

It was 11:30.

The road to Vandalur was deserted. It was the third day after the new moon, and the sky was pitch black. The few stars that tried to break through the darkness were wrapped tightly in cloud.

The highway and the railway tracks ran side by side. Chandrachudan slowed down, looking for a place where he could park the car out of sight.

Three kilometres from Vandalur, he saw a tamarind grove close to the tracks, and drove in and stopped the car. He switched off the headlights and engine. The darkness around him seemed to swallow him up. He sat for a while in the car.

Stillness.

Sinister darkness all around.

A brisk sea breeze.

At 11:40, Chandrachudan got out of the car. He opened the back door and slowly pulled Nirmalkumar's body from the seat, looking nervously around him. He held the body under his arm and dragged it to the tracks.

The rails shone like silver in the dim moonlight. He laid Nirmalkumar's body across the second set of tracks.

At a distance he could see the blood-red signal lights twinkling dangerously, and beyond them some vague station, the lights still on. He crossed back over the tracks and reached the car. He waited till he heard the *prronk* of the train engine leaving the station, then turned the key in the ignition. The car headlights opened their wide eyes. He turned the car around and drove back towards Chennai.

There was nothing more to fear.

Finally calm, he sped home.

Vivek and Gokulnath returned to Coimbatore from Bellary. The case was getting even more confusing; the man who had committed suicide was not Illango.

"We don't know who the guy is," Gokulnath said. "We're not even completely sure it's not a murder. Let me tell you, I've never encountered such a tough case in all my years of service."

Vivek tapped the ash off his cigarette and grinned. "The only way we can proceed is if we find out who Illango gave his card to. So let's forget about it for now. We have to be patient, try and see where the thread begins."

Just then the telephone shrieked for attention. Vivek reached for the receiver.

"B-2 Police Station… A call from Bellary? Yes, sure, put it on."

Gokulnath gave him a sharp look.

"Yes Mr. Illango… This is Vivek, from the Crime Branch."

The connection was feeble, but Illango's voice was confident. "Sir… I know who that dead person is."

"Yeah? Tell me."

"Last week I was travelling by the Blue Mountain Express from Chennai to Coimbatore. He was in the same coach, sitting opposite me. He sat silently until we reached Arakkonam. Then he struck up a conversation. I think I must have given him my card after that…"

"Did he give you a card?"

"No."

"Did he say where he stayed in Chennai?"

"Sorry sir, I don't know. I only remember that he didn't talk about himself much. He kind of avoided answering my questions. A little while later, he went up to his berth."

"When did you make this journey?"

"On the twenty-third."

"That was a Thursday?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember your coach?"

"E Coach."

"And your berth number?"

"I don't remember that."

"Did you have your berth booked early?"

"No, they only gave me a number once I got on the train."

"So it must have been in the last numbers, sixty or above. And this chap had his berth opposite yours?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, that's very helpful. If you happen to remember the man's name or address, do let us know."

"Yes sir."

Vivek hung up.

16

Flipping open *Dhinathandhi* to the eighth page, Chandrachudan pointed out a news item in the second column.

Nadia scanned the story.

MAN RUN OVER ON RAILWAY TRACKS NEAR VANDALUR STATION
BODY DAMAGED BEYOND RECOGNITION
DEAD MAN'S AGE AROUND TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

Nadia ran the tip of her tongue over her dry lips, set the newspaper aside, and looked up at Chandrachudan, scared.

"Will the police find out?"

"How could they? It says right here, 'damaged beyond recognition.' Even if they do identify him as Nirmalkumar, how will they connect him to me? All we have to do now is to swear that chap never came here."

The telephone chose that moment to ring. Chandrachudan answered the call.

"Sir, this is Chandra, Nirmalkumar's sister."

"Yes, how are you? How's your father?"

"I'm calling to let you know that my brother won't be able to come to work for some time," she said. "We've admitted him to the hospital."

"Your brother? The hospital?"

"Yes sir, someone beat him up and threw his battered body on the railway tracks near Vandalur!" she sobbed. "Luckily, a lineman saw him and brought him to the hospital. The doctors had to battle through the night to save his life."

"You're sure it's Nirmalkumar?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which hospital is he in?"

"General Hospital."

"Do you know who beat him up?"

"He's still unconscious. The lineman found the ration card that he carried in his pocket—that's how he was able to contact us."

"Have you informed the police?"

"Not yet."

"I am coming to the hospital. Which ward is he in?"

"In the I.C.U."

Chandrachudan put down the receiver and looked up, sweat dripping from his face.

"What happened, Anna?" asked Nadia.

"Somehow Nirmalkumar escaped death. We didn't kill him after all. He's in the hospital now, recovering!"

"But what about the news in the papers today?"

"It must be someone else."

"What do we do now?" she asked, terrified.

"We have to do away with Nirmalkumar before he regains consciousness and reports everything to the police!"

"How?"

"Money can pave many paths, Nadia. All we need to do is disconnect his oxygen tube for a minute and pack him off to heaven. I can get anyone in the hospital to do it for me."

Chandrachudan sprang out of his seat, ready for action.

17

Chennai. Central Station. Reservation Booking Counter.

"Tell me again, what date did you say?" asked the booking clerk, Baskara Nambiyar. Vivek and Gokulnath were sitting in front of him.

"The twenty-third of last month."

"You mean Thursday?"

"Yes."

"You said the passenger's name was Illango, from Bellary, travelling on the Blue Mountain Express?"

"Yes."

The clerk made a telephone call. Three minutes later, a ledger and a few typewritten sheets landed on his table, smelling strongly of a central government office. Baskara Nambiyar wetted his forefinger on the damp sponge and flipped through the ledger until he reached the column with the header *Train No. 3, E Coach*. He adjusted his spectacles and said, "Here it is. His berth number was sixty-eight. That's an upper berth. Now, you want to know who was in the berth opposite to him. Right?"

"Yes."

Baskara Nambiyar leaned forward to read the name...

18

Nadia sat in the front seat biting her fingernails as Chandrachudan drove. The car was speeding down the road. But at Teynampet, they got stuck in a traffic jam. Chandrachudan decided to turn off the engine and wait.

"Sir," came a voice from his right side. He turned. There was a young man hugging a file to his chest, his tie flying in the breeze, with a cheerful smile on his face. "Could you drop me off at Shanthi Theatre, please?"

Chandrachudan gave Nadia a look before committing himself.

"Madam," continued the young man, "I have to be at an interview. I've been waiting for an auto for the last fifteen minutes. I have to be at Shanthi Theatre at ten-thirty."

"Nadia, ask him to sit in the back seat."

"Thank you sir! Thank you madam!" the young man trilled as he got comfortable in the back seat. The traffic signal finally turned green. Chandrachudan started the car at once.

"Sir," said the young man from behind them. "Can you turn onto White's Road for a second?"

"Why?" snapped Chandrachudan. "Didn't you want to go to Shanthi Theatre?"

"Sorry, I made a mistake. Please go to White's Road."

Nadia turned her head angrily. "Are you playing a game, mister?" she demanded in English. "Anna, stop the car here, let him get out."

"Madam, I'm trying to be nice about this. Will you please go to White's Road?"

"What do you think you're—" Chandrachudan whirled around, and then froze immediately.

The man was slowly raising a titanium revolver from behind his file, and was aiming it at Chandrachudan's neck.

Nadia looked about ready to scream. The young man silenced her with a chilling look.

"Now, let's go to White's Road."

Chandrachudan hesitated. The revolver kissed his skin. "I have no mercy," the young man said. "I'll shoot you down like dogs. White's road, please. Now!"

Chandrachudan took the turn.

"That's better," the young man said good-naturedly.

"Who are you?" asked Chandrachudan.

"Do I have to tell you that now?"

They were silent.

"I'm Tony, Nadia's friend Ragini's boyfriend. Take a left here, please..."

"Where are you taking us? We've never met you before."

"Did I say we had met? I'm taking you and Nadia to my place for a business deal. You'll find out more when you get there."

"My sister and I are in a hurry to get to the hospital to see a friend. Can we come to your place after that?"

"No, Chandrachudan. Go straight and then turn right. You'll come to Rose Garden Avenue. Head to the last bungalow. The gates will be open. The business deal will be done in a couple of hours. You and your sister can leave after that."

"But—" Nadia began.

"Shut up, Nadia. I don't want to hear any more questions from either you or your brother. If I do, then I won't be the one who answers—it'll be my revolver!"

There was no more talk in the car after that. They approached the bungalow. Chandrachudan drew to a halt in the portico. Almost at once, two young men rushed out from inside. One had unruly hair and the other was bald. Each weighed over eighty kilos. They looked like a couple of wild buffaloes. Tony was the first to get out of the car.

"Khader..."

"Yes, Tony?" said the bald one.

"Shut the gates." He turned to the other and said, "Manik, take them in. You two—go with him. I'll be there soon."

Chandrachudan and Nadia got out of the car and followed Manik. The bungalow was opulently furnished; every square foot gleamed with the polish of wealth. Manik led them to a room. Chandrachudan took a step inside, then stopped in his tracks as if he had been shot. Nadia stood trembling like a blade of grass.

19

As Baskara Nambiyar read out the person's name and address from the reservation list, Vivek carefully noted it down.

"Thank you very much for your cooperation," he told Nambiyar. He shook his hand and they left the counter.

For the first time since the day they'd discovered the body in the rock-walled room, Vivek and Gokulnath smiled.

20

There was a double bed in the centre of the room. At the head of the bed was a camera, ready to roll. The entire room was wallpapered with pornographic pictures. The windows were covered with black cloth.

"What's all this?" demanded Chandrachudan.

"This? This is a shooting set." Manik grinned. "You'll see."

"You rascal!" Chandrachudan leapt at Manik, grabbed him by the collar, and shook him so hard that it looked for a moment as if all his limbs would fall off.

"Chandrachudan!" The voice came from behind. It was Tony, chewing a piece of gum and grinning. "Let go of him. We have business to do. It's nothing to do with you, actually. We need your sister Nadia for a while."

"What are you going do to her?"

Tony chewed his gum more vigorously. "I guess you don't know that North Indian men—and foreign men too—go crazy over Tamil women, and are willing to pay lakhs for blue films featuring them. Your sister has a great body. I just need her for two hours—with no clothes, of course. You can wait in the next room and then take her back when we're finished."

"Deyyyyyyy!" Chandrachudan jumped on Tony. His left hand clenched around his neck and his right curled into a steel fist and punched his stomach.

Tony lost his balance for a second. "Manik!" he called out. "Tie him to the pillar!"

Manik twisted Chandrachudan's arms behind his back and dragged him to the pillar. Nadia ran behind, wailing helplessly.

Tony grabbed her shoulder. "Where are you off to, Nadia?"

"Chee! Let me go!"

"I hear from Ragini that you love to watch blue films. Is it true?"

"Dey, get off me!"

"So now let's see you *star* in a blue film. That's a different thrill altogether!" He lifted her like a flower and took her over to the bed. He turned to Khader and asked, "Have you shut all the doors?"

"Yes Tony."

"Good. Now give Nadia the injection. I need to get the camera ready."

Manik was plastering Chandrachudan's mouth with a strip of tape. Tony laughed out loud.

"Chandrachudan, you missed your chance. I told you you could sit in the next room, but you wouldn't listen. Now we're going to have our fun with Nadia right in front of your eyes! We'll move the camera around to shoot her from different angles. And there's nothing you can do to save her."

Chandrachudan tried to register a muffled protest but soon gave up. Tony gently stroked his cheek and whispered, "This bungalow doesn't belong to me. The owner goes to the States for three months out of every year. I forced the watchman at gunpoint to let us borrow it. We've been here for fifteen days. When I saw you two at Teynampet signal, I was out hunting for a young starry-eyed actress. Luckily I found Nadia. I was there trying to hook a small fry, but landed a golden fish. Thank God!"

Chandrachudan was still struggling to get free.

"Don't trouble yourself, Chandrachudan. Give me just a couple of hours. Oh, another thing—don't imagine your sister is going to give us any trouble, okay? Khader has just given her a 'sex-inducing injection.' She'll cooperate, and very willingly. Her senses will be aroused to every male hand that touches her. She'll be in heaven! She won't even notice you, tied to your pillar there, or these lights that make this room look as bright as a summer day. She won't even hear the camera. We'll use her, and then, in three hours, we'll disappear from the state. We'll sell Nadia's video and make ourselves rich. Then we'll come back in six months to shoot the sequel."

21

Nirmalkumar came to consciousness very gradually. Mangaleswari and his sister Chandra were standing on either side of his bed, looking thrilled and relieved. His father, on seeing his son slowly open his eyes, drew his chair closer.

"Appa..." Nirmalkumar gazed weakly at them, his eyelids fluttering rapidly.

"Who did it? Who bashed you up like that and threw you on the tracks?" Ramalingam demanded.

The faces of Chandrachudan and Nadia flashed through Nirmalkumar's memory.

"Tell me… I want to tell the police."

"I don't know, Appa."

"You didn't see them?"

"No. I got down from the bus and was headed home. Someone jumped me and demanded that I hand over my watch and my ring. I refused. He strangled me, and I blacked out."

"Couldn't you identify him?"

"It was too dark."

Nirmalkumar closed his eyes tight and tried to erase Chandrachudan and Nadia from his mind. *Don't worry sir; I am not going to give you away. I will leave it to God to punish you for your actions. Yours is the hand that feeds me, sir; I shall not name you to the police!*

22

The lights blazed like tiny suns. The camera whirred. Nadia was on her back on the bed, naked, with a stoned look in her eyes. Khader and Manik were also nude, lying on either side of her, toying with her body, strumming it like a veena. Tony was cranking the camera. Chandrachudan shut his eyes. The tape had fallen from his mouth. "Noooooo!" he groaned. "You rascals…you gutter dogs!"

23

"This is the bungalow…"

As soon as Vivek spoke, the taxi driver cut the engine. He and Gokulnath got out of the cab. There was a police jeep already stationed in the portico.

"Wow, did the Madras police really beat us here? Did you inform them, Vivek?"

"No. Let's go in and see what's going on."

At the front door they were met by Inspector Avinash, who gave them a smart salute.

"Mr. Avinash."

"Sir."

"Is this Chandrachudan's bungalow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is there a photograph of him somewhere around?"

Avinash found this request strange, but it wasn't his job to question them. He pointed to a photo hanging on the wall.

Vivek and Gokulnath looked at it and whispered together, "It's him!"

Then Vivek turned to Avinash and asked, "Avinash, what are you here for? Anything important?"

"Yes, sir. This bungalow belongs to Chandrachudan and his sister Nadia. Last month a friend of hers took both of them, at gunpoint, to another house in Rose Garden Avenue. They drugged Nadia and raped her in front of her brother's eyes. His groans were heard by some passers-by, who called the police."

Unable to control his eagerness, Gokulnath asked, "Have you nabbed the guys?"

"All except one, named Khader."

"Where's the sister? Is she in?" asked Vivek.

"No, sir. She's in the mental asylum. She hasn't stopped crying. The brother has disappeared. We've been trying to trace him."

"You want to know where Chandrachudan is, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come sit down. We need to talk."

They moved to the sofa. Gokulnath pulled out the photographs of Chandrachudan from his pocket.

"These are photos of a suicide, sir?" asked Avinash.

"Or maybe a murder," said Gokulnath. "We've identified the man, but we don't know what the motive for the murder was—or how he managed to kill himself, if he did."

"Perhaps we have to go back to the water tank," said Vivek, scratching his chin.

24

Indra Park was dark in the misty evening. Ramasami, the watchman, opened the room below the tank for Vivek and Gokulnath.

"There's no more doubt, Vivek. This was a murder."

"Gokulnath, remember there was a patch of wetness under the feet of the body? We had sent a sample to the lab. Did the report come in?"

"Yes, it did. It wasn't urine, as we suspected. It was just water."

"How did the water get there?"

"There's a water tank above. Perhaps there's a leak."

"Why was it under Chandrachudan's feet and nowhere else?"

Gokulnath looked unsure.

"This was no murder, Gokulnath," Vivek went on. "It was a suicide after all. What brother can bear watching his sister get raped in front of his eyes—and captured on camera? He walked out of his house, despondent, and came here to Coimbatore to hang himself."

"But how, Vivek?"

"Let's think, Gokulnath."

They questioned Ramasami again. He repeated the same story he had given them before. Frustrated, Vivek walked out of the park to his Honda, and he noticed a man working outside the building next to the park.

There was a flash in Vivek's mind that he could not ignore.

25

"Gokulnath, did you see that man?"

"He looks like he's scattering sawdust on something."

"Can't you see what it is?"

"No."

"Do you remember what that factory is?"

"Yes, it's an ice factory."

"That man is scattering sawdust on blocks of ice so that they won't melt, Gokulnath. Let's go question him."

"About what?"

"If he says yes to even one question of mine, then this case is solved," said Vivek as they walked up to the man.

"What's your name?" Vivek asked him.

"Badsha, sir."

"Do you work at this factory?"

"Yes."

"Why are you stacking the blocks of ice here?"

"The lorry to carry them to Sathyamangalam will come tonight at eleven."

"So the load goes every day?"

"No sir, only twice a week."

"Do you keep count of the ice blocks?"

"Of course we do."

"Who loads them into the truck?"

"I do."

"Now Badsha, I need your help. I'm sure you've heard that a chap was found dead in the room under the water tank over there…"

"Yes, sir."

"Now tell me, were there ice blocks stacked here last Sunday night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who loaded the truck that night?"

"I did, sir."

"Was one ice block missing?"

Badsha gasped. "How did you know that?"

"Tell me, am I right?"

"Yes, there was one missing. I thought I must have made a mistake. But how did you know?"

Vivek gave a smile. "I just guessed, Badsha. I only have one more question."

"Sir…?"

"How tall is a block of ice?"

"About a foot and a half."

"Can a man stand on it?"

"Of course."

Gokulnath clutched Vivek's hand, excited. "I see it now, Vivek. Chandrachudan stood on that ice block to hang himself. The wet patch we saw under his feet was what was left after the ice melted. Am I correct?"

"Absolutely," said Vivek, as he shook Badsha's sawdust-covered hand. "Thanks, Badsha."

They walked to the Honda and kicked it alive. "Case closed, Gokulnath," said Vivek. "Please don't wish me 'Dead morning' on the phone again...at least for the next few days. Say '*Good* morning' instead."

"I'll try, Vivek," Gokulnath promised with a grin.

Poetry from the inside covers of an issue of *Best Novel*
by Raja Selvaraja, BSNL, Karadivaavi



Love

Dark clouds...
Bring storms...
You taught me this,
My dark Moon...? In
the rain of your love!!
I swam across
You proved it to me??
But it did not last...
The rain of your "love"



Heart

Whether you are...
With me...
Or without me...
Till I become dust...???
Till I am buried...
I shall preserve you...
In my heart...
In my mind....
The thoughts about you...!!
And your precious gifts...??

RESAKEE

Resakee was the pen name of R. M. Kumaravel, who, as editor of the bimonthly pulp magazines *Great Novel* and *Best Novel* and the sporadic *Everest Novel*, was one the leading figures in modern Tamil pulp publishing. The wacky, lurid covers of these magazines decorated newsstands across Tamil Nadu for over twenty years, until Kumaravel's death just weeks before this anthology went to print. Each issue would typically feature a Rajesh Kumar or Indra Soundar Rajan novella as a centerpiece, but would also include a merry assortment of jokes, poems, clip art, reader's letters, and fan fiction tucked in at the end. Occasionally, in the back pages, the reader might find a short story by the publisher himself.

The following story is openly indebted to Kollywood (as the Tamil commercial film industry is known, due to the location of the major studios in the Kodambakkam area of Chennai). The title is a pun on a film title, *Kadhalukku Mariyawadhai* ("Reverence for Love"), and Resakee has even cast the leads.

SACRILEGE TO LOVE

காதலுக்கு அவமரியாதை (2009)

Dear Readers,

Please do not be misled by the title of this story. This is not a romance. What kind of story is it then, you ask? It is a story of a brother's love for his sister.

Oh no—don't assume it is full of saccharine sentimentality.

There will be a few blows, but this is no violent story.

There will be a police squad, but this is no detective story.

There will be a settling of scores, but this is no revenge story.

And there will be more 'nos.' But don't think there will be no storyline.

Resakee

1

"AMMA," ANITA CALLED OUT as she entered the living room. "I'm leaving."

This was a family of three: a mother, an elder son, and a younger sister, who were extremely attached to each other. The father had died long ago, and the mother had gone through a very hard struggle to raise her two children. It was only after the elder son, Bhaskar, had settled into a profession that the household had seen some luxuries.

Anita, in her final year of engineering college, resembled the popular film heroine Sneha. A pleasant smile, pretty eyes, and a complexion that would attract any passerby! Her fetching looks turned many heads every time she stepped out of the house.

"Bye Anna," she said to her brother, who was in the room reading a newspaper. He resembled the famous villain actor Prakash Raj.

"Are you off already? Be safe!" smiled Bhaskar, and he called for the driver outside. "Selvam! Selvam!"

"Coming sir!"

Bhaskar watched his sister leave through the front door. *She has just one more year of college left. I will start her marriage arrangements soon,* he decided.

He couldn't know that his plans were doomed to failure.

Neither did Anita, as she opened the rear door and got into the car, have any idea of what was in store for her.

Selvam started the car.

2

Selvam drove smoothly so that Anita wouldn't be disturbed. But he was lost in thought.

Should I ask her now, or wait till we get to the college? Will she accept or reject my appeal? What if she insults me? Maybe she will give me one of her beautiful smiles.

At the college, he parked the car outside the gate. Anita got out and, before walking to her class, asked softly, "Selvam, are you unwell?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Then why were you so silent this morning? You're usually such a chatterbox."

"Er, I was thinking about something."

"Really?" she asked, surprised. "What was it?"

Selvam took the letter from his shirt pocket and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"Read it and you'll know."

The moment she opened it she realized what it was about.

"What's this, Selvam?" she asked sharply.

The first bell sounded. Anita tucked the letter into one of her books. Looking up, she said sternly, "Selvam, I hate everything having to do with romance. So please forget your stupid idea." She turned to walk off.

Selvam followed her, pleading. "Anita, please don't be hasty! I love you with all my heart. Think about it, at least till I come to pick you up this afternoon. I'm hoping you'll have a letter for me too."

Fuming, she ignored him and rushed off to class. When her classmates saw her looking troubled, they crowded around her to ask the reason.

"Nothing," she said, wiping her face with a handkerchief, trying to calm herself down.

At lunch break, Anita told two of her close friends about Selvam.

"You should have torn the letter into shreds and flung it in his face," one suggested vehemently.

"I just didn't know how to react right then."

"Show us the letter," demanded another. Anita took out the letter and her friend read it aloud.

My darling Anita!

This is a plea straight from my heart. I don't know how to craft this letter. My heart is racing and I can't think straight. Still, I have to convey my feelings to you; that's why I write this. I will be the luckiest man in the world if you accept my love. I am eagerly awaiting your

reply. I can almost hear you chiding me for my ineptitude as a letter-writer. Please don't be angry with me. Very soon you can expect a letter describing your beauty. Right now I cannot find the right words. The film lyricists Kannadasan and Vairamuthu have appropriated all the poetic words. Please give me some time. America and Russia are sending their astronauts to the moon. Let them find some new things there to which I can compare you.

Yours, Selvam—to whom you are the breath of life!

Finishing the soppy letter, the girls collapsed in loud laughter.

"I don't know whether I should be angry at him or laugh at him," giggled Anita. They gathered their books and lunchboxes to return to class.

At four in the afternoon, Anita waited at the gates for the car. Selvam soon arrived in it, parked it next to her, and got out. Anita opened the rear door to get in.

"Anita, you haven't said anything about my letter."

Anita could not control her anger. She drew the letter from the book, tore it into a million bits, and flung them at Selvam's face. The other students gathered around them. Selvam flew into a rage and became a ferocious beast. He grabbed her by the hand.

"Why? Is it that you don't like me? Or is it because I'm only a driver? Tell me! I can resign and get a different job—"

"Selvam, let go of my hand!"

"Say you love me and I shall carry you like a flower!" While Selvam was busy spouting romantic dialogues, the college watchman ran towards them from the gate.

The men volleyed some angry words back and forth, and the exchange suddenly escalated into violence. It ended with the watchman snatching the car keys from Selvam and physically throwing him out of the college.

Anita stood with the keys in her hand. As she did not know how to drive, she called her brother on her mobile. Within a short while, Bhaskar arrived on his friend's bike. When Anita told him about Selvam,

he became furious. Not visibly revealing his anger, he took the key from her and started the car. She sat beside him in tears and they drove off, her head bent in embarrassment.

✗ 3 ✗

Bhaskar drove in silence, furious and deep in thought. His blood boiled over and he became almost demented. He parked in the portico, walked into the house, threw himself on the sofa, and shut his eyes. Finally coming to a decision, he abruptly pulled out his mobile and called his friends.

"Guys, listen carefully. I want you to come to the place I tell you, this evening at seven sharp."

"What happened, Bhaskar?"

"I'll tell you then. Be there at seven." He gave the address.

7 P.M.

Bhaskar and his three friends reached Selvam's house. They knocked gently on the door. There was no answer, so they knocked again. And again. After their third try, an old woman opened the door.

Though she had met Bhaskar before, she could not imagine why he would be here now. Casually, she said, "Hello Thambi, come in!"

"That's alright. Is Selvam in?"

"Who's that, Amma?" enquired Selvam as he joined her at the door. When he saw Bhaskar, he paled.

Bhaskar's friends stepped up, hauled Selvam out by the collar, and threw him on the ground. One kicked his face, another kicked his back, and yet another pulled him upright and punched him hard in the stomach. His old mother started to wail.

"*Aiyyo*, please leave my son alone! Don't hit him! I'll fall at your feet," she begged, hugging Bhaskar's feet.

Over her sobs, Bhaskar ordered his friends, "Dey...let him go."

Selvam crumpled back to the ground, bleeding from his nose and mouth.

"Now listen, woman," Bhaskar snapped at the mother. "If he continues to follow my sister around claiming to be in love with her, then don't blame me if one day he comes home dead."

"I promise you, Thambi, that will never happen again! I'll warn him."

Somewhat mollified by her tears, Bhaskar threw one burning look at Selvam before the group turned to leave. The old woman stared at their backs as they strode off.

Selvam could not bear the public insult he had been put through. An intense hatred towards Bhaskar filled his heart.

4

Anita had started using public transport to get to college. Some days had passed, and she had forgotten Selvam completely.

Nevertheless, remember that there is something called *fate*...

And it would not spare Anita.

Now she had another problem.

As she waited at the bus stop, a pair of eyes admired her from afar; a heart was pledged to that beauty, and many nights of sleep had been lost to thoughts of her. One soul waited to declare its undying love.

This pining soul belonged to a young man by the name of Raghu, who owned a stationery shop across the road from the bus stop. These days, Raghu's main occupation was following Anita. He would open the shop in the morning and then let his helper handle all the business while he waited at the bus stop for her. He would take the bus along with her, get off at her college, wait until she was safely inside, and then take another bus back to his shop. He would repeat this routine in the afternoon.

Anita could not help but notice this pattern. She knew who he was, of course. She'd been to his shop three times: once to buy a pencil, again to buy some white sheets of paper, and the last time to buy a ruler. *Was* that *my mistake?* she wondered. *Does he follow me because I visited his shop a few times? Was that enough to make him to fall in love? What kind of a shallow person is he?*

She could not speak about it to her brother. After all, when she had heard what he and his friends had done to Selvam, she had been thoroughly shaken. She could not subject another person to that violence. She decided to change her route to college.

Remember what I said earlier, about fate?

One of Bhaskar's friends had also noted Raghu's routine, and he mentioned it to Bhaskar.

"Who is he?" demanded Bhaskar, in a rage.

"His name is Raghu; he runs a stationery shop. I got his mobile number—it was there on the signboard," replied the helpful friend.

Bhaskar called the number at once. It was Raghu who took the call.

"Hello… Raghu Stationery Mart!"

"Sir," said Bhaskar in a polite voice. "I'm calling from Universal Enterprises."

"Yes?"

"We'd like to place a large order for stationery with you. If you could come over in person, we can give you the details and finalize the deal."

Unaware of what was in store, Raghu jumped up eagerly.

"Please give me your address!"

When Raghu rolled his bike into Bhaskar's compound, Bhaskar came out with his friends. At a silent nod from the friend who had identified him, Bhaskar said with a wide smile, "Friends, he has come for the order. Why don't you guys give him a really big one?"

The friends crowded around Raghu. Immediately, Raghu understood something was amiss. His insides filled with burning acid. *I am in danger!* he thought—even as the first blow knocked him down. He screamed aloud, but they were deaf to his pleas. Anita and her mother, though, were drawn outside by the howls. Anita read the situation immediately.

"Stop this at once!" she declared in a loud voice. "Anna, tell your friends to let the poor man go."

Gradually, the rain of blows slowed and stopped.

"Are you men or beasts?" Anita demanded. "Don't you have consciences at all? You went all the way up to Selvam's house and knocked him down. Now you call this man here just to beat him up. Is violence

your only reaction to any problem? You wouldn't do this if you had an iota of trust in me."

Bhaskar stood stunned at her barrage.

Anita went into the house, brought out a bottle of cold water, and gave it to Raghu. He drank swiftly, rinsed his face, and returned the empty bottle.

"Mister," she told him. "I don't know your name, and I'm not even interested in knowing it. I think all this love-at-first-sight stuff is completely infantile. By constantly shadowing me the way you have done, you could wind up ruining my studies forever.

"Had we gotten to know each other as friends, then perhaps I could have developed romantic feelings for you. But how can you expect a woman to fall in love with you when she doesn't even know you exist? Shouldn't you use your brains? Please stop thinking about me and concentrate on running your business."

Once Raghu left, she turned to Bhaskar again.

"If you don't believe in love, then that's your personal opinion. But don't expect everybody to be an emotionless rock like you. I wasn't very interested in love myself. But now, after seeing your adamant resistance, I am curious to find out for myself what this deep romance is all about!"

Not waiting to see his reaction, she went inside.

5

No one can predict what changes time can bring about. You will come to understand soon that fate never takes a holiday; it is extremely conscientious about its duties.

Dear readers, don't be puzzled—though actually, I'm a little bemused myself. After all, Anita has led a peaceful life up till now. Who would believe that she could suddenly decide to fall head over heels in love? And yet, don't forget that she is a woman, with a heart!

Over the last few months, that heart had become occupied by a young man named Vinod. He ran a net centre, Royal Browsing Centre, which was close to Anita's house. It had more than ten computers.

Now that Anita had completed her degree, she went to the centre every evening to browse the net. It was during those regular visits that she gradually lost her heart to Vinod. He taught her how to handle the computer and, along with that, the greatness of *love*.

She was drawn to him by his competency in computers and other electronics. He in turn was attracted by her beauty and her sharp brain.

Initially, of course, Bhaskar had no idea about all this.

But you can't hide love forever!

The day Bhaskar found out, he flew into his usual rage.

After what had happened with Raghu, Bhaskar knew he could not proceed in his usual manner. He decided to do something secretive.

Totally unaware of Bhaskar's deceitful plans, Anita was enjoying a fruit juice in a coffee shop with Vinod when she saw Selvam and Raghu approaching them.

6

What are these two doing here? she wondered. *Are they going to cause trouble because of what my brother did to them?* Her sudden tension alerted Vinod.

"What's wrong, Anita?" he asked.

"Oh, it's nothing!"

The two men had come up to their table. They sat down in the empty seats.

"Who are you?" demanded Vinod, agitated. "There are plenty of empty tables. Why are you barging in on us?"

Selvam and Raghu gave gentle smiles. "Don't be hasty, brother. You don't know who we are. But Anita does."

"What's all this, Anita? Who are these men?"

"Relax, I'll explain," said Raghu.

After a detailed explanation of what Bhaskar had done to both of them, it was Vinod's turn to look worried.

When a waiter came over to the table, Raghu turned to him and said, "Two coffees please." Then he smiled at Anita.

"Anita, don't be scared. Wipe the sweat off your face. We're here to help you two."

Anita and Vinod could only gape at them in surprise.

"We know your brother, Anita," said Selvam. "He's never going to accept your love. He's sure to cause problems. So we've come to a decision..."

"And that is?"

"It's true that the two of us were crazy about you. But now we only want the best for you. We think that would be the proper way to honour the love we have for you.

"The mistake was on our part. We were in love with you, but you had no such feelings for us. So instead of continuing with this one-sided love, we want to unite you with the love of your life."

Anita gave a sigh of relief. The coffees arrived.

Sipping his coffee, Raghu said, "Your brother beat the daylights out of us, just for saying we loved you. Now, if he comes to know that you deeply love Vinod, he'll do everything he can to separate you. So we promise to stand by the both of you. We're ready to sacrifice our lives so that you can be together."

Anita's eyes filled with tears. Vinod was still scared stiff by thoughts of what might happen.

Somewhat calmed by the comforting words of Raghu and Selvam, Anita and Vinod rose to leave. Meanwhile, Bhaskar sat alone in his house, plotting.

7

My sister has a boyfriend! Bhaskar fumed. *What do I do now?*

He sought the counsel of his friends.

"Who is he?" Bhaskar asked them.

"His name is Vinod," replied a friend. "He runs a browsing centre where he has computers and Xerox machines, and also sells mobile phones. Your sister goes there every evening to browse the internet."

"What should I do now?"

"Listen Bhaskar...you remember hitting those two guys who were after your sister?"

"Of course!"

"They're now both determined to help Anita and Vinod in their affair."

Bhaskar looked up in surprise. "What should I do? If I beat this man up, it will only strengthen Anita's love for him."

"If we can somehow get this Vinod nabbed by the cops, it would be easy to convince Anita that he's no good for her," suggested another friend.

"Bhaskar, I have an idea," piped up a third friend.

"Tell me, tell me!"

"I know a chap who exchanges counterfeit currency. Let's go to Vinod's shop and purchase a mobile phone with fake notes. Then we can give the police an anonymous tip and get them to raid the shop. He'll be arrested and our job will be done."

Bhaskar was energized. "There's one problem, though. What if Vinod sees me at the shop?"

"That's not a problem at all," said the first friend. "Your sister and Vinod go off on jaunts at five every evening and don't get back for at least for a couple of hours. During that time there's a school drop-out who handles the shop. I'll go there at five, buy the phone, and call you before seven."

"We'll do it this evening," declared Bhaskar.

5:30 P.M.

Making sure that Anita and Vinod were not at the internet centre, Bhaskar's friend entered with six fake five-hundred-rupee notes and asked for a mobile phone. Taking the currency from him, the shop helper gave him the mobile and two hundred rupees change. The friend returned to Bhaskar's house, after which Bhaskar went to a public telephone booth two streets away and called up the local police station.

"Sir," he said in a hushed tone. "It's not important who I am. Pay attention to what I have to say. There's an internet café in the main bazaar, Royal Browsing Centre. It has an active fake currency deal going on.

If you raid it immediately, you'll be able to find some." With this, he disconnected the call.

6 P.M. Royal Browsing Centre.

Selvam arrived to meet Anita and Vinod, not realizing that they would be out. When the helper informed him, Selvam called Vinod on his mobile.

"Hi Vinod, this is Selvam. I dropped by to meet you."

"Anita and I are at the bank. Selvam, can you do me a favour?"

"Sure...tell me."

"I had dropped off one of the computers for service. Also I need to get some toner. Can you please collect them for me?"

"Of course. Give me the address."

"Give your phone to my helper Ravi there."

Selvam handed his phone to Ravi.

"Sir, this is Ravi."

"Ravi, give Selvam five thousand rupees and the address of the service centre."

"Yes sir."

Ravi wrote out the address on a piece of paper, then took out ten five-hundred-rupee notes from the drawer and gave both to Selvam. Ravi did not know that six of the ten notes he had just given away were fake!

Selvam left on his bike.

Just then a band of cops barged into the shop. One of them lifted Ravi by his collar and demanded, "Tell me straight. Where have you put the fake currency?"

"Fake currency? I don't know what you talking about, sir..." Ravi slunk away in fear. "Sir, please call my boss."

In a short while Anita entered with a flustered Vinod.

The cops surrounded Vinod, demanding, "Tell us where you hoard your fake currency notes!"

They proceeded to check his pockets.

"Sir, he's clean..."

They turned back to growl at Ravi.

"Open the drawer! Is this all the money you have? Did you give any to anyone?"

"Yes sir. I just gave Selvam, my boss's friend, five thousand rupees to collect a computer from the service shop."

"Dey," the police told Vinod, "ask your friend to come back here immediately. Don't warn him; just tell him you need the money for some urgent personal matter."

Vinod contacted Selvam on his mobile and said what he had been ordered to say.

Sensing a trap, Anita excused herself and went to the toilet. From behind the shut door, she called Selvam and whispered, "Selvam, the police are here to check for fake money. Check what Ravi gave you carefully, please."

In a few seconds Selvam replied, "Anita, you're right! Six of the ten five-hundred rupee notes that Ravi gave me have the same serial number."

"Selvam, go over to Raghu's and ask him to lend you six proper notes. Hide the fakes with him and get over here fast."

After some time, Selvam came in. When the police pounced on him, he calmly handed over the ten five-hundred rupee notes.

They checked them over and over, but could find nothing wrong with them.

"Sorry Mr. Vinod. We got some false information." With that apology, the police squad left the shop.

9 P.M.

When Anita entered her house, the first thing that caught her eye was a new mobile in the living room. She quickly deduced her brother's involvement in that evening's fiasco. Immediately she called Raghu.

"Raghu, can you bring the six fake notes to my place? Don't come in, though. Call me from the end of the street and I'll come and collect them."

When Raghu brought the notes, she quietly went into to her brother's room and took out his wallet. From it, she removed six good five-hundred-rupee notes and replaced them with the fake ones.

8

The next morning. 9 A.M.

Bhaskar went to the bank to deposit some money. He filled in the chalan and handed it over at the counter along with the notes.

The teller counted the money and found something strange. He called the peon, gave him the notes, and told him to take them to the manager. Soon Bhaskar was called to the manager's office.

"Where did you get these fake notes, Mr. Bhaskar?"

"Sir..." Bhaskar swallowed in fear.

"Please tell us, Bhaskar. You are an old customer of this bank. Do you realize what could happen if I take this up with the police?"

"Yes, sir. I have no idea how these notes got into my wallet. I had the money for a long time in my bureau. I brought it today because I had a cheque to clear. I am sorry about this. It will never happen again."

The manager tore the six notes into pieces and threw them into the bin.

"Mr. Bhaskar, I've known you for a long time. That's why I'm not going to the police."

"Thank you, sir."

When Bhaskar came out of the bank, he thought hard. *How did the money that was supposed to be in Vinod's shop get into my wallet? Did Anita have something to do with this? I have to put a stop to this, once and for all.*

On his way back home he ran into a police inspector, a longtime friend of his. He waved and signaled him to stop.

"Hey Bhaskar, how are you?"

"I'm alright..." Bhaskar chatted with him about a few random things before he opened the topic of Vinod.

"What did you say this young man does?"

"He runs an internet centre."

"Then stop worrying, your problem is solved," said the inspector cheerily. "Send someone to his centre, someone you can trust. Tell him to send off an email to some VIP that there's a bomb in his house that's about to go off. The police will be called; they'll trace it back to this man's centre, close it down, and arrest him."

"Thank you Inspector," replied Bhaskar gratefully. "Once that lout is in prison, I'll treat you for drinks."

But who can I get to do this? Bhaskar wondered. *It can't be anyone who can be traced back to me. So it can't be a friend. Then who?*

9

Once again, Bhaskar gathered his trusted friends.

"I know a man who can operate a computer," said one friend. "He's a complete mercenary, and will do anything for money."

"Fine, get him to do it then." Bhaskar passed him a bundle of fifty-rupee notes.

"I'll see that it gets done and then meet you," replied the friend, taking the money.

"Once you're done and Vinod is in the lock-up, I'll throw a bash in a five-star restaurant for us!" crowed Bhaskar.

"Super!" His friends went on their way.

5:15 P.M.

As arranged, the man came to the internet centre. There he sent out an email to a minister about the bomb, paid for the time, and went away.

When the minister's secretary read the email, he became agitated.

Phone calls were made to the inspector general's office and the police commissioner. The bomb squad went to the minister's residence and checked thoroughly.

The tense commissioner demand angrily, "Where did the email come from?"

The investigation led back to Royal Browsing Centre. A group of police were dispatched.

Meanwhile, Vinod dropped Anita off at her house and went over to the centre—where he was in for a surprise. It was thronged with police and a curious public. The police had already confirmed that the email had been sent from one of Vinod's computers. After a long session of questioning, though Vinod kept insisting that he hadn't been there for the past two hours, he was arrested and taken to prison. The centre was shut. A huge official lock was placed on the door.

Bhaskar's friends, who had been watching all this from a distance, called him to give him the happy news. Thrilled, he told them to join him at a five-star hotel for a treat that very night.

10

Anita, watching the early morning news on the television, was shaken. The story detailed Vinod's arrest the previous night. Dazed, she asked her mother, "Amma, where is Anna?"

"I don't understand him anymore. He came in very late last night, completely drunk..."

Again, Anita read the situation at once. After a brief moment of thought, she quickly bathed, dressed, and left for the commissioner's office. She waited till she could meet him personally.

"Good morning, sir. This is about the arrest you made last evening. The man is a good friend of mine."

She gave him a detailed account of her love affair, her brother's objection to it, and his previous attempts to get rid of Vinod.

"Sir," she continued. "There is a CCTV in the internet centre. If you were to check those tapes, you might be able to find the culprit. I know most of the regular customers. So we'll look for anyone new or suspicious."

The commissioner sent for the assistant commissioner.

"Mr. Guru," he instructed, "go with her and check those tapes."

Anita accompanied the assistant commissioner in his official car. They stopped briefly at the local police station to pick up two constables, and then drove to the internet centre.

Anita carefully scanned each face on the monitor. She recognized all of them except one.

"Sir, they're all regulars...except this man."

The assistant commissioner looked at the constables. One gave a salute and said, "Sir, I know who he is. He's a local thug. We've already have had him in a couple of times before."

"Do you know where we can find him?"

"Yes, sir. Come with me."

The police soon had the suspect in the lock-up. On questioning, the commissioner was stunned to learn that a police inspector had been involved in this, and ordered his suspension to immediate effect.

Vinod was released.

When Bhaskar heard what had transpired that morning, he burst like a volcano. Vinod had escaped two attempts to put him behind bars. Now there was nothing else to do but to snuff him out.

Unless I make sure that Vinod is dead, I will have no peace. But where and how do I do it?

To celebrate his release, Vinod went with Raghu, Selvam, and Anita to watch the film *Subramaniyapuram*.

The film's storyline was very close to their reality. The elder brother comes to know of his sister's affair. Along with the rest of the family, he falls and weeps at her feet and begs her to save the family's honour. He asks her to bring her lover to meet him in secret, where he has thugs chop up the lover right in front of her.

Upset by the film, Raghu and Selvam suggested an alternative plan. They told Anita, "Your brother is enraged. He won't ever rest. Vinod is in danger. We need to take preventative action..."

"So, what do you think we should do?"

"Anita, don't get angry at us for suggesting this."

"Please, go ahead."

"Your love must win. You should live happily together ever after. So..." Raghu was visibly nervous.

"Go on."

"You must bring your brother to the place we ask you to."

"And if I do?"

"Then we'll finish your brother off. He is the only obstacle you have."

Vinod did not appear disturbed at all. Only Anita was taken aback.

"We thought of several ways out. But we can't think of any plan better than this, Anita. We fall at your feet to beg you..." the three threw themselves at her feet.

"Aiyyo...please. What is this?" she stopped their efforts. "Where do I bring my brother and when?"

"Tomorrow night, eight o'clock, to Mahatma Gandhi Park."

Anita, choked with emotion, nodded her consent.

12

The next morning. 9 A.M.

Anita sat next to her brother, who was having his breakfast.

"Anna," she said softly, "I need to talk to you."

"What is it, Anita?"

"You shouldn't be angry with me."

"When have I ever been angry with you? Go on."

"I know you don't approve of my love for Vinod. Still..."

Bhaskar was silent.

"He wants to speak to you in private."

Bhaskar sat up to attention. *I wanted to see him myself, to finish him off. And now he wants to meet me!*

"Have I ever said no to you Anita? Tell me when I should meet Vinod."

"Tonight at eight in Mahatma Gandhi Park..."

"I'll be there. You come along too."

He washed his hands, went into his room, removed a revolver from his wardrobe, and gave it a hard kiss.

13

Bhaskar was on a high for the rest of the day. It was as if the fruit had slipped on its own into his cup of milk. No, more than that! The fruit had slipped on its own right into his mouth and slid down to his stomach. He could not wait for eight in the evening.

Why does he want to meet me? Perhaps he is going to plead for my consent, that I should allow him to marry Anita. If he does that, I must encourage him. That will give me time to toy with him a bit and get him to trust me before I shoot him down. Still, how will Anita react after I shoot? Will she make a scene? I will beg her pardon and swear that I only did it in a fit of temper. If she believes me then it will be easy to make the world think it's a suicide. But what if she sees through my plan and wants to go the police?

Then I'll have no choice but to gun her down too. I'll throw the revolver next to them. If the police get to me, I'll claim that they both committed suicide because I wouldn't consent to their marriage. Of course, the revolver can never be traced back to me. After all, I procured it on the black market.

14

That night. 8 P.M. Mahatma Gandhi Park.

It was dark.

The only sound came from the leaves in the thick grove of trees, gently rustling in the breeze.

Raghu and Selvam arrived on their bikes, followed by Vinod on his. They stood silently waiting for Bhaskar and Anita.

In a little while a car rolled in and stopped. Bhaskar and Anita got out and started to walk towards them.

When Bhaskar saw the waiting men, he was outraged. *Anita told me Vinod wanted to meet me in private! Why has he brought along Raghu and Selvam? Well, I'll wait and see what happens,* he decided. *If things turn nasty, I'll gun down all three of them!*

They stood opposite each other, glaring.

This was no space for words to be exchanged.

Suddenly Selvam pulled out a sickle he had hidden in the back of his shirt.

At once Bhaskar drew out his gun from his pocket.

Who would go first? Who would be the first to die?

15

An impassioned Anita sprang in between the two sides.

"Stop this nonsense!" she yelled.

The men stood shell-shocked.

"I need to speak with you all. After that you may go ahead and kill each other if you want." She took a deep breath and glared at them all. "Have none of you any brains? You want to kill my brother, and he in turn wants the three of you dead. Did none of you think of me?"

The men didn't know how to react.

She turned to Vinod. "Did you give a moment of thought to how I would feel if you killed my brother? He was the one who brought me up after my father died. He loves me deeply. Even his decision to kill you was only made so I would have a good life. Do you think I could live in peace with you after he's dead? Wouldn't I be tortured by that loss? Wouldn't I blame you for it? Wouldn't I begin to hate you afterwards? Do you think I would even consider marrying you after you killed him? Think, man!"

Then she turned to Bhaskar. "Anna, I thought you would be the first to understand me. You think killing the man I love will kill the love in me too? Wouldn't I be tormented by our intense feelings for each other? I cannot think of a life without Vinod. And yet you imagine that if you do away with him, I will instantly agree to marry the man you choose for me, instead.

"Both of you are egotistical maniacs! Whichever of you dies, the loss will be only mine. Please, I don't want any lives to end for my sake. That would be a sacrilege to pure love. Do not cast that blemish on it. I refuse

to have bloodshed! Vinod, the only respect we can show to our love is to separate decently. So…"

"So?" Vinod asked, tensed.

"I refuse that love you had for me, which gave you the audacity to think of killing my brother. Equally, I refuse my brother's love, which made him think of killing you. I don't want either my brother's love or my lover's love. I am educated. I can take care of myself. But I shall never marry, ever! That is both the punishment I give my brother, and my offering to our pure love!"

Bhaskar put the revolver back into his pocket. Selvam let the sickle slip out of his hold. Vinod approached Anita to hug her. She merely put up a stern forefinger and whispered, "Shh!"

Then she turned around and walked away towards a new life.

End

Sacrilege to Love

Climax 2

(For you diehard romantics!)

Anita walked away from the men in tears. Selvam and Raghu climbed onto their bikes to drive away. Vinod kicked his bike alive.

Bhaskar ran up to him, switched off his bike, and removed the key.

Vinod climbed down, looking doubtful. Selvam and Raghu got off their bikes and came over in a hurry. Sensing the movement behind her, Anita looked around. Thinking that maybe Vinod was still in danger, she too ran over.

Bhaskar gave a smile, took out the car key from his pocket, gave it to Vinod, and said, "Take Anita with you."

TAMIL FAMILY NAMES AND TERMS OF ADDRESS

Athaan	Husband, as called by his wife; literally, male cross-cousin (paternal aunt's or maternal uncle's son).
Aande	Lord, or god; respectful address, as to a feudal master.
Aatha	Mother; often used to invoke the mother goddess.
Aiya	Respectful address to a man (especially a feudal landlord).
Amma	Mother, or female employer; also sometimes used to address a goddess in prayer.
Akka	Elder sister (or any older woman).
Anna	Elder brother (or any older man).
Anni	Sister-in-law (elder brother's wife).
Athai	Paternal aunt or mother-in-law.
Chithi	Mother's younger sister.
Da	Informal masculine address.
Dey	Masculine address, disrespectful or angry.
Di	Informal feminine address.
Maama	Respectful address to a father-in-law (or maternal uncle).
Paatti	Grandmother (or any old woman).
Thambi	Younger brother (or any younger man).
Thangachi	Younger sister.
Thatha	Grandfather (or any old man).
Thayi	Mother, or respectful address for a woman; sometimes used to address a goddess in prayer.

GLOSSARY

Aavana	A nickname formed from the initial "A", specific to the Chettiar caste; used mockingly.
adengappa/adeyyappa/ appada	Expressions of amazement or awe.
Advaita	A sub-school of the Vedanta tradition in Hindu philosophy.
Aippasi	In the Tamil calendar, the month lasting from mid-October to mid-November.
Aiyanar	A village deity, commonly worshipped across Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka, frequently depicted riding a horse or elephant.
aiyyo/aiyaiyyo	Expressions of surprise or lament; "Oh dear!"
aley	"Hey"; call for attention, or address to someone of lower status.
Ambikapathi and Amaravathi	According to legend, Ambikapathi was the son of the great Tamil poet Kambar, and Amaravathi the daughter of a Chola king. Their doomed love affair has been the subject of plays and movies.
angavasthram	An unstitched, usually bordered cloth, worn over the shoulder by men, along with a veshti.
Amma, yevaro ochinnaaru	Telugu: "Mother, someone has come."
appada	An expression of amazement.
apsara	A celestial nymph.
aruval	A sickle or machete.
Bharatanatyam	A classical dance form from Tamil Nadu.
Bharathiyar	Subramanya Bharathi, 1882 – 1921, a famous Tamil poet who was active in the independence movement.
Brahma	God of creation; responsible for writing the fates of all living things.

chakra	A disc-like weapon, one of the symbols of the god Vishnu.
chee	An expression of disgust.
chenda	A cylindrical wooden drum.
Chiranjeevi	A famous Telugu film star.
choli	A blouse worn with a sari.
crorepathi	A millionaire; literally, someone with at least a crore (1,00,00,000) of rupees.
cross-cousin	The child of one's paternal aunt or maternal uncle; in most Tamil communities cross-cousins are considered ideal marriage partners.
dada	A gangster.
darshan	The beholding of the deity.
davali	A peon in a government office.
Desingh	18th century chieftain and expert horseman who challenged the powerful Nawab of Arcot.
Devas	Demigods.
Devi Durga Parameswari	Mother goddess; an incarnation of Parvathi.
dhavani	half-sari
Dhinamani	Daily Tamil newspaper.
Dhinathandhi	Daily Tamil newspaper.
diwan	The finance minister of a princely state.
diya	A small oil lamp made of brass or clay.
durai	A lord, especially a white man.
durbar	Palace court room.
Dvapara Yuga	The third of the four *yugas*, or Vedic ages of mankind.
En raasa, vaigunda poitiye, en aiyane sivalokam poitiye...	Opaari lyrics: My king, you have left to Vaigundam [the heavenly abode of Vishnu]; my lord, you have left to Shivalokam [the abode of Shiva].

FIR	First Information Report: a written document prepared by the police when they are first informed of a crime.
garbagraham	The inner sanctum of a Hindu temple where the idol is housed.
gopuram	An ornate monumental tower on top of a temple.
homam	Ritual fire lit and fed with ghee to invoke the gods.
jallikattu	A bull taming sport played in Tamil Nadu, similar to the Spanish running of the bulls.
kalasam	A sacred pot, kept on top of a temple, or used in a yagam.
Kalidasan	A famous Sanskrit poet and playwright, c. 5th century.
Kambar	A 12th century Tamil poet best known for writing the Tamil *Ramayanam*.
Kandha Shashti Kavacham	A prayer song to Lord Murugan composed by Devaraya Swamigal.
Kandhar Shashti	An annual festival held in October or November at Thiruchendur temple to commemorate the slaying of Suran, lord of the Asuras, by Lord Murugan.
kanji	Rice porridge.
Kannadasan	A 20th century Tamil poet, novelist, and essayist, best known for his film song lyrics.
Kannagi	The heroine of *Silapathikaram*, worshipped as the goddess of honour and chastity.
karwar	Clerk.
Kattabomman	18th century South Indian chieftain who led an early rebellion against the British.
kolam	An intricate design drawn with rice flour or paint at the front doorstep as a sign of welcome.

Krishna Deva Raya	Emperor of Vijaynagar, 1509 – 1529.
kumkum	Sacred red powder given in temples.
kuthuvillaku	A tall lamp, usually brass, with five wicks.
Lakshmi	Goddess of wealth.
lathi	Police baton.
lingam	A phallic stone idol representing Lord Shiva.
Maasi Magam	The day of the star of Magam, in the month of Maasi, is an important festival day for the goddess Amman.
maidan	An open space used for outdoor gatherings, meetings, etc.
manathakkaali keerai	Greens from the black nightshade plant.
mandap	Temple courtyard with a ceiling but no walls, supported by columns.
Marathandavar	Deity of the rudraksh tree; one of the names of Lord Murugan.
Margazhi Thingal madhi niraindha nannaa-laam...	"On this first day of the month of Margazhi, bathed in the full moon's glow..." Lyrics from the first song of the Thiruppavai, a 7th or 8th century collection of 30 songs written by Aandal in praise of Vishnu. Margazhi is the month of Dec. 15 – Jan. 14.
Mari	Short form of Mariamman.
Mariamman	Dravidian mother goddess, incorporated into Hindu mythology as an incarnation of Parvathi, consort of Shiva.
mela	A gathering or festival.
M.G.R.	M. G. Ramachandran, a popular Tamil cinema actor who went on to turn his fan club into a political party, and served as chief minister of Tamil Nadu for over ten years until his death in 1987.

Muneeswaran	A Dravidian folk god, later incorporated into Hindu mythology as an incarnation of Shiva.
Murugan	God of war and patron deity of Tamil Nadu; the son of Lord Shiva.
mutt	A Hindu monastery.
Namaskaram	"Greetings"; "Salutations"
Nayakar Mahal	A palace in Madurai, built in 1636 by Thirumalai Nayakar.
opaari	A lamentation song for the dead.
paal appam	A South Indian breakfast made with coconut, rice flour, yeast, and milk.
padmasana	A cross-legged yoga posture; lotus position.
pallangkuzhi	A game played with shells; a variety of mancala.
pallu	The part of a sari that covers a woman's chest and drapes over her shoulder.
pangaali	A parallel cousin, descended from father's/ grandfather's brothers or mother's/ grandmother's sisters.
Parthasarathy	The charioteer of Arjun; a name of Lord Krishna.
Parashakthi	Ultimate feminine power; an incarnation of Parvathi
payasam	A sweet dish made with boiled rice, milk, and sugar.
Perumal	An incarnation of Lord Vishnu.
pey	A ghost-like supernatural creature, able to take a physical form.
Podhuvaaga en manasu thangam ...	"Usually, my heart is made of gold..."; lyric from the film *Murattu Kaalai*.
poha	A flattened rice dish.

Pongal	Harvest festival held in January; also, a rice dish. A sweet version of the dish is often given as prasadham.
pottu	A sacred mark on the center of the forehead; also a symbol of marriage.
prasadham	Normally, something edible that has been given as an offering to a deity, and then distributed in the deity's name and consumed.
rajaguru	A royal spiritual advisor.
Rajkumar	A famous Kannada film star (1929 – 2006).
rakodi	A circular bejewelled hair ornament.
rakshasa	A demon.
rangoli	An intricate design drawn with rice flour, pigments and/or paint at the front doorstep as a sign of welcome.
rishi	A sage; a speaker of the truth.
rudraksh	The berry of an evergreen tree from North India, used as a prayer bead.
saamiyar	A recluse or ascetic
saar	A Tamil-accented way of saying "sir".
saarey	A Malayali-accented way of saying "sir".
Saiva Siddhantham Mutt	A mutt dedicated to studying and following the Saivite tradition.
samasthanam	A feudal princely state.
sankha	The conch shell; one of the symbols of the god Vishnu
Seth	In Tamil usage, a businessman of North Indian ancestry, often a pawnbroker.
Shashti	The sixth day after the new moon in the month of Aippasi, a day of importance to Lord Murugan.
Shiva	God responsible for destruction; father of Murugan.

siddhi	Supernatural powers attained by meditation or magic, including clairvoyance, levitation, etc. The eighth and last siddhi is *vastva*, the power to subjugate all.
Silapathikaram	An ancient epic Tamil poem, atrributed to Ilango Adigal.
sirsasanam	A yoga posture in which the body is held completely inverted, in a headstand.
Sukran	The planet Venus.
sundal	A spicy snack made with channa (chickpeas).
thaarai	A single-headed drum used in folk music.
thali	A sacred thread tied around a woman's neck and worn as a symbol of marriage.
thappattai	A single-headed drum used in folk music.
thayathu	A metal cylinder, usually containing a rolled-up prayer, worn as a charm on the neck or arm.
thilak	A religious mark worn on the forehead.
Treta Yuga	The second of the four *yugas*, or Vedic ages of mankind.
tulsi	A sacred herb; a relative of basil.
udukkai	A small, double-headed, hourglass-shaped drum with variable pitch, known in North India as *dugdugi*.
urumi	A double-headed, hourglass-shaped drum, slightly larger than the udukkai; one head is lubricated with castor oil and rubbed with a stick to produce a moaning sound.
Vairamuthu	A noted Tamil poet and film song lyricist, born in 1953.
Valluvar	Thiruvalluvar; celebrated Tamil poet who wrote the Thirukkural, a work of ethics written in the form of 1330 couplets. His dates are the subject of debate, but lie in the range 200 B.C. – 600 A.D.

vanakkam	Hello; welcome.
Vande Mataram	Literally, "Mother, I bow to thee"; the title of a Bengali poem written in 1882 by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. Originally a hymn to the goddess Durga, it became the rallying cry of the Indian independence movement in 1896, with "Mother" now reinterpreted as Mother India.
veena	A large plucked stringed instrument used in Carnatic classical music.
veshti	A traditional man's garment; an unstitched piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and knotted at the waist.
vibhuti	Sacred ash, applied on the forehead or throat or placed on the tongue.
V.O.C.	V. O. Chidambaram, also known as *kapalotiya thamizhan* ("Tamil captain"), as he was the only Tamil to own a merchant ship in his day.
We Two, Ours Two	Originally a slogan for the government's family planning campaign, used here as a titty joke.
yaar	Friend (Hindi).
yagna	A ritual in which oblations are poured into a sacrificial fire.
Yaman	God of death.
yantra	A mystical or astrological diagram.
yercum	A flower which typically grows in cremation grounds; the sap is poisonous and sometimes used for infanticide.

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